



Death and the Art of Dying

IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

Bokar Rinpoche

Death and the Art of Dying in Tibetan Buddhism

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ClearPoint Press
San Francisco, California

Death and the Art of Dying in Tibetan Buddhism

Published by:

ClearPoint Press

PO Box 170658

San Francisco, CA 94117

Parts of this text were published in France in a book entitled *Mort et art de mourir dans le bouddhisme tibétain*

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Editions Claire Lumière

5 avenue Camille Pelletan

13760 Saint Cannat, France

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ClearPoint Press

Printed in the United States of America

Second printing 2001

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 93-074661

ISBN 0-9630371-2-9

Cover design: Robin Spaan

Amitabha Buddha cover drawing: Cynthia Moku

Back cover photograph: Dan Jorgensen

Translator's Preface

If we think about it carefully, we will soon realize that death is the only certainty we have in our lives. Of course, we do not know when our turn will come. We have a choice: we can face death or we can ignore it altogether. Do we want to consider the moment of death as a final disaster or do we want to prepare for it?

Generally speaking, Western cultures treated death as a taboo not to be examined. Now, death is largely handled by the medical and psychological professions. The teachings contained in this book underscore the fundamental importance of having a spiritual practice in this lifetime. By developing a firm spiritual foundation, it will be easier for us to live with the reality of death.

What will you find in the book you now hold in your hands? Bokar Rinpoche brings an active tradition which he has acquired through study and caring for the living and dying. His intimate knowledge of Tibetan texts and their application is condensed here into four chapters. He guides you through the different stages of dying and gives you skillful means to encounter death. He shows the benefit of maintaining a constant awareness of the inevitability of death, both to enrich your life and prepare for death. He offers instructions to approach death in daily life and guidelines for helping others.

Death is illustrated here in the concrete example of a great yogi, Kalu Rinpoche. With this example, we discover the role that awareness of impermanence has on an awakened being during the process of dying. We can learn from this practice.

Carefully read these teachings. They are like seeds Bokar Rinpoche has brought us. If we nurture them with reflection and contemplation, they will grow into a flower of joyful wisdom. This wisdom will illuminate life and death, dispelling fear and terror.

This book is a compilation of the translation of a French book, and later teachings given by Bokar Rinpoche in Mirik, India. A small

glossary has been added to clarify the meaning of certain words for those unfamiliar with Tibetan Buddhism.

We are profoundly grateful to Bokar Rinpoche for the precious gift of these teachings, which otherwise would lie beyond the reach of ordinary beings. Ngodup Burkhar translated the interviews given in India from Tibetan into English. Lama Choky (François Jacquemart) translated the teachings from Tibetan into French for the French edition and also verified the translation of the later teachings. I was helped by many friends in the different phases of production. Thanks to Chiao and Ernie Crews, Rosemary Gilpin, Hubert Godard, Juanita Hall, Don Iocca, Chen-Jer Jan, Bruno and Surma Mauro, Gene Meyer, Bill Minasian, William Sleeper, Isao Tanaka, and Edmond Tondeur for their love, encouragement, and support. Special thanks go to: Jacqueline Cattani for checking the translation against the French; Reverend Carol Himaka for her drawings of the feminine Buddhas; Elson Snow for reading the manuscript and his suggestions for improvement; Jennifer Pessereau for patiently editing the complete text; and Michael De Noya for proofreading the final version.

May the reading of this book bring you joyful wisdom!

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Introduction to the French text

Milarepa, the prince of yogis used to sing:

The fear of death has led me to the snowcapped mountains.

On the uncertainty of the moment of my death I have meditated.

Thus I have reached the immortal stronghold of true essence.

My fear has vanished into the distance.

Later, the great sufi poet, Djalal Od-Din Rumi was to say:

Our death is our wedding with eternity.

Not so long ago, Sri Ramana Maharishi, the wise man of Arunachala wrote the following in one of his rare books:

Those who fear death intensely only take refuge at the feet of the Supreme Lord whom neither death nor birth can impress. Dead to themselves and to all possessions, how could the thought of death arise within them? They are immortal!

We will almost certainly never be as certain as these sublime beings. At best we will have hope and at worst we will experience the anguish of nothingness.

Death, who are you? What do you have in store for us? Will you end with all-encompassing darkness the fleeting moments of several decades of life? Or will you open a window onto other worlds, other splendors, and other hells for us?

From the scientist for whom awareness and the brain are unequivocally linked to the sage who during this lifetime has realized immortality, there are many responses.

Buddhism asserts that beings live beyond the impermanent fluctuations of this earthly life. Death is not a definitive end but a passage to one of three other states:

- a rebirth into the cycle of conditioned existence, either into the world of human or other beings, where a constant flow of joy and suffering goes on;

- the entry into a pure land, a domain of manifested light as we shall see later;

- the flowering of the ultimate nature of being as a pure, non-dual, unlimited, all-knowing and all-loving consciousness, which is called Buddhahood.

It takes an entire life of labor to prepare for these achievements. Nonetheless, when the time comes, there is an "art of dying," an *ars moriendi* as it was said in the Middle Ages. Such will be the main thrust of this work even though a general description of death had to be provided and is contained in the first chapter. The real issue, the one from where it will be pointless to divert oneself with fine theories, is as follows: how can we turn our death into a positive enrichment? Such was the question we asked Bokar Rinpoche and which he answered in the precise context of Buddhism and, more particularly, within the Tibetan tradition. Another essential issue: how can we accompany those who are leaving before us and what can we offer them by way of a pleasant journey?

As curious as it may seem when dealing with a subject like this, this book is intended to be more practical than philosophical. May this book ensure that our last moment is also the most beautiful.

François Jacquemart

Note: The book you are now going to read comes partially from public teachings but for the most part is transcribed answers to questions asked privately of Bokar Rinpoche.

Death

THE BARDOS OF DEATH

The Tibetan word *bardo* belongs to the vocabulary of time. It designates an interval of a marked beginning and a definite ending. For instance, a conference starts at a precise point in time and ends at another precise point; its duration can be called a *bardo*. The term does not just apply to death but to any experience or phenomenon within a time limit of any duration. The time of a finger-snap could also be defined in this way. If one were to write out a list of all *bardos* one would never finish. So, for convenience's sake, let us limit the number of *bardos* to a few major categories; say, two, four, or six depending on the approach we use.

Let us consider the six *bardos*¹; the first three belonging to our present lifetime and the last three belonging to death:

- The *bardo of birth to death* which ceases as soon as the first signs of the agony of death start;
- The *bardo of the dream state* which is delimited by the moment we fall asleep and by the moment we wake up;

¹This number of *bardos* can also change. Sometimes, for example, one finds a *bardo of taking birth* included whereas the *bardo of meditative concentration* is left out.

- The *bardo of meditative concentration* which lasts from the beginning to the end of a meditation session;
- The *bardo of the moment of death* which commences when the death process begins and which lasts until actual death;
- The *bardo of dharmata* which starts when death occurs and lasts until the deities appear in the *post-mortem* state.
- The *bardo of becoming* which starts when the previous *bardo* ceases and ends when we are born.

The essence of the mind of all beings is called the *essence of awakening*¹. From this point of view, which is that of ultimate truth, there is no *bardo*. We know nothing of this ultimate nature of the mind and that is why all sorts of illusory manifestations occur in the relative mode. Among these, there are the six *bardos* that cause much suffering. Buddha's teachings intend to dispel such erroneous experiences and their resultant suffering.

These teachings underscore the fundamental importance of having a spiritual practice during the three *bardos* of this lifetime. By developing a firm spiritual foundation, it will be easier for us to traverse the three *bardos* of death.

¹The essence of awakening (Sanskrit, tathagata) or Buddha nature refers to the fact that awakening or buddhahood is nothing new to be added to our mind. Awakening is primordially present but only becomes manifest once all the superimposed veils have been removed, or, in other words, when illusion ceases to mislead us.



Aksobhya Buddha

At best, if we already understand the nature of the mind¹, it will be unnecessary for the three *bardos* of death to manifest themselves. In this case, it is like taking an elevator to the top floor of a building, without having to stop at any other floor. Although we may not have reached this realization in our lives, the spiritual development we have acquired will make it easier to experience the three *bardos* of death and perhaps recognize their real nature; we would then be free of them.

The six *bardos* are not six domains existing independently within ourselves. They are related to our mind which lives in a state of delusion. The six *bardos* manifest out of our mind. It is our mind that has the experience and it is also our mind that recognizes their false nature and liberates itself from them.

The way we experience the six *bardos* depends only upon our mind as they are the mind's reflection. Consider a house of six rooms in which each wall is covered with mirrors. The man living in this house is dirty, has untidy hair, wears ragged clothes, and is always making faces. He goes from room to room and the mirrors steadily reflect the same image of an unkept man with a grimacing face, untidy hair, and ragged clothes. Similarly, when our mind

¹The nature of the mind is an absolute and immutable reality which is difficult to perceive through our veils of confusion.

is distorted by a lot of negative *karma*¹, each of the six *bardos* reflects suffering. The house occupant could also be clean, well dressed, and smiling. Everywhere he goes from room to room, he sees a clear and smiling face. The house remains the same but there is no more ugliness, nor appalling sights. Everything is seen as pleasant and peaceful. When our mind is free of negative *karma* and the passions that disturb it, the six *bardos* reflect a picture that resembles us, full of peace and happiness. Whether pleasant or not, appearances do not depend on the six rooms. An individual fills the rooms with his or her own nature. Likewise, negative experiences of the six *bardos* do not depend on the *bardos*, but on our own mind.

Let us consider the process of the three *bardos* of death.

The *bardo* of the moment of death

Our body is made up of four elements as follows:

- Flesh, bones, and solid constituents that belong to the earth element;
- Blood, phlegm, and bodily fluids that belong to the water element;
- Body temperature that belongs to the fire element;
- Respiration that belongs to the air element.

¹Negative *karma*: all negative deeds, ones that deliberately make other people suffer, leave an imprint in our mind that will condition our experience and our vision of the world; that is our own suffering.

At the moment of death, these elements are absorbed into each other and give rise to a twin series of phenomena, external and internal.

First, the earth element is absorbed into the water element. Externally, one can no longer move one's limbs, and internally, the mind sees things like mirages.

The water element is then absorbed into the fire element. Externally the mouth and tongue become dry, and internally, we perceive smoke that passes us or rises up.

Next, the fire element is absorbed into the air element. Externally, heat leaves the limbs, moving from the extremities toward the center of the body. Internally, we see an array of sparks.

Finally, the air element is absorbed into the individual consciousness¹. Externally, breathing ceases, and internally, we see something like the flames of flickering butterlamps².

This process of gradual reabsorption of the four elements is followed by the *three path* process. At the same time another phase starts and is called *appearance-increase-attainment*³.

¹Individual consciousness (Sanskrit, vijñāna; Tibetan namshe) or dichotomous consciousness refers to the consciousness that operates in a dual mode, grasping an object separated from a subject. Primordial consciousness operates in a non-dual mode. The former is ordinary consciousness and the latter is awakened consciousness. Individual consciousness is similar to ego consciousness.

²A lamp used by Tibetans which is fueled by butter.

³Regarding the exact meaning of these terms, see page 20.

First of all, the individual consciousness is absorbed into *appearance*. At the same moment, the white *tigle*¹ of masculine principle located at the top of the head descends as far as the heart². This phase is called the *white path*. Internally, a great white luminosity enters the mind.

Secondly, *appearance* is absorbed into *increase*. The red *tigle* of feminine principle located at the base of the spine rises to the heart. This is the *red path*, characterized by the manifestation of a great red luminosity.

Finally, the white masculine principle and the red feminine principle join at the heart. This is the *black path*. For an instant, the mind experiences emptiness and then falls into complete darkness.

Technical descriptions of the various phenomena occurring at the moment of death are more than mere curiosities. If we have no prior knowledge of the process of absorption of the elements into each other, and of the succession of the three paths, we may be distressed and frightened when they appear. From knowing this process,

¹*Tigle* (Sanskrit, bindu) literally means "drop." In the subtle energy systems that connect the mind and the body, *tigles* are mobile concentrations of energy endowed with special functions. The white and red *tigles* mentioned here are the subtle supports of feminine and masculine sexual energies. Also note that all individuals, regardless of sex, are endowed with these two *tigles*.

²The *heart*, here and elsewhere in this text, does not refer to the physical organ but the *chakra* of the heart located along the central *channel* at the level of the heart. In Tibet, people consider the *heart chakra*, not the brain, to be the seat of the *mind*.

we are forewarned and therefore we will not be assailed by the fear of the unknown.

At this point, we can continue further and deepen our understanding. Apart from learning the way the phenomena manifest, we can experience the pure essence of the paths (white, red, and black) and the four elements.

The pure essence of the four elements is the four goddesses¹. At the moment of the unfolding of the phenomena caused by the absorption, we think the phenomena are the manifestation of the four goddesses:

- Buddhalocana, earth element;
- Mamaki, water element;
- Pandaravasini, fire element;
- Samayatara, air element.

These goddesses have always existed naturally in the mind. If we know how to recognize their expression, we will not fear them.

If we find it hard to accept or integrate the notion of goddesses, we can develop another approach by thinking, "The phenomena occurring now are illusory manifestations

¹In *Vajrayana* Buddhism, any manifestation is ultimately considered to be the manifestation of pure mind. Given the fact that the manifestation of form is organized on the basis of the four (or five) elements, the corresponding pure principles must therefore exist in the mind. These principles are called the four goddesses or the four feminine Buddhas (five if you add the element space).

of my mind. They do not exist of themselves and are nothing other than a production of my mind¹.”

The three paths also have these three Buddha bodies² as their own pure essence:

- White path, body of emanation (nirmanakaya)
- Red path, body of perfect experience (sambhogakaya)
- Black path, absolute body (dharmakaya).

There is nothing frightening about these paths. If we have practiced *mahamudra*³ for a long time, we will recognize the end of the black path as the manifestation of the *fundamental clear light*⁴.

Recognizing this fundamental clear light means “becoming Buddha in the absolute body at the moment of death.” It is said that it also means “being liberated as a

¹Imagining that phenomena are illusory manifestations of the mind does not contradict the fact that they are the manifestations of the four goddesses. At the relative level of duality, they are illusory; we see them as having their own objective existence. At the ultimate level of non-duality they are the four goddesses.

²The three bodies are the three aspects of an awakened being.

³*Mahamudra* is a meditation enabling us to recognize the profound nature of the mind beyond its psychological fluctuations.

⁴Recognizing the clear light does not mean that the mind grasps something, but it becomes aware of its true nature which is both non-dual and luminous.

Buddha in the first *bardo*." When awakening is attained, the *bardo* no longer continues¹.

On the other hand, if the fundamental clear light is not recognized, the mind slips into a deep state of unconsciousness of variable duration, which is generally said to last three and a half days.

The period of time beginning with the absorption of the elements and ceasing at the end of the three and a half days is designated as the *bardo* of the moment of death.

Question: When we say that the elements are absorbed into each other, what do we mean by "to be absorbed into?"

Answer: In this instance "to be absorbed into" means that the energy governing each element ceases to be functional and is absorbed into the energy of the following element. This process of absorption of the four elements into each other does not occur only at death, it also happens in an extremely subtle manner when we fall asleep or when a thought is removed from our mind.

Question: We have seen that when the elements are absorbed into each other, another process occurs called appearance-increase-

¹Many beings can reach buddhahood in this manner. One must not mistake buddhahood and the role of the *historical Buddha* who was the initiator of a spiritual tradition intended to last a long time. So during our *kalpa* (cosmic era), it is said that a thousand Buddhas must appear and that Sakyamuni would be the fourth among them. This does not mean that only a thousand beings will reach buddhahood, it means that a thousand will have a historical mission to accomplish.

attainment. Why are these words used? Are we talking about the appearance, increase, and attainment of the clear light?

Answer: No, not quite. These words do not just refer to clear light, they are used to describe the process of beginning and ceasing of a mental state, at the moment of death or in other circumstances such as when we sleep or produce thoughts. Depending on whether the mental state is ceasing or beginning, there are two systems:

- The progressive system where the external moves inward;
- the regressive¹ system where the internal moves outward.

At the moment of death, it is the progressive system that comes into play.

The regressive system can be illustrated by the process of waking up. During deep sleep, consciousness is absorbed into the *consciousness potential*². All consciousness—visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental consciousness—is in a latent state. When we wake up they move out of this potential. The precise moment when they move out of the virtual state and become active corresponds to *appearance*. This is the very first moment they start up even before an object is

¹Progressive and regressive have no connotative value in this instance. They simply denote two movements that pass each other in the opposite direction.

²Consciousness potential or consciousness reservoir means that the mind is like a reservoir of karmic potential in the course of ripening. In other words, it is the *unconscious*, but in a larger sense than the meaning as defined by modern psychology.

perceived. The second phase is *increase*. For example, it corresponds to the moment a shape is seen by the visual consciousness through the eye. This phase is called *increase* as it marks an enhancement of the experience of which the *appearance* was the beginning. That is the second instance of this experience. Finally, the perceived object is identified in the moment we think, "This is a glass." This phase is called *attainment*. The regressive system applies just as well to a person's birth or the conception of a thought.

The progressive¹ system, the one we have considered for death, is also illustrated by falling asleep. Returning to the example of the glass, the perception of the glass is the *appearance* phase. When we fall asleep, it is no longer perceived, and this we call *appearance* absorbed into *increase*. As we fall into deeper sleep, *increase* is absorbed into *attainment*. *Increase* begins the process of absorption into the consciousness potential. When the absorption is complete, we are in the phase of *attainment-clear light* or the *clear light of the fundamental nature of the mind*. In fact, it can only be clear light provided we identify it, otherwise it is simply ignorance or an unconscious darkness.

¹This progressive system presents the three phases in the same order: *appearance-increase-attainment*. As mentioned earlier, these three terms describe the development of a mental process that can either go from inward to outward or from outward to inward. Given the fact that it denotes the intensification of the process, the order cannot be changed. Practically speaking, it is another way of saying *beginning, middle and end*.

Question: We have noted that there is a relation between the three phases of appearance-increase-attainment and the three bodies of awakening. How can this be explained?

Answer: Appearance is the equivalent of the white path. One sees a flash of white light. When it is not truly recognized, the experience is mentally perceived as the cessation of aggressiveness, but its energy remains. If we recognize its essence, it is the body of emanation.

Increase is the equivalent of the red path. One sees a flash of red light. If it is not recognized, the experience mentally perceived is the cessation of desire-attachment, but its energy remains. Its essence is the body of perfect experience.

Attainment is the equivalent of the black path. One sees a flash of dark glow. If it is not recognized, the experience is mentally perceived as the cessation of delusion, but its energy remains. Its essence is the absolute body, and also called the *fundamental and clear light*.

Another phase can be added to the previous three and is called *total attainment*. This means that the essence of the black path is recognized and the clear light is experienced. *Attainment* and *total attainment* have almost the same meaning although *attainment* is located in the instant before the clear light is recognized whereas the *total attainment* follows this recognition.

These different phases occur for all beings. Everyone can experience the state of clear light, but unless one is awakened, one does not recognize this state. For most beings, these phases are not a source of awakening.

Question: What is the clear light?

Answer: Clear light means dwelling in the nature of the mind and abiding in its essence without being carried away by thoughts. While meditating, we keep the mind in its own essence; this is the *clear light of the path*.

At the moment of death, after the *appearance-increase-attainment* phase, fundamental clear light appears. If we recognize the fundamental clear light, it is said that the daughter and mother clear light meet. This means that experiencing the clear light of the path continues into fundamental clear light. That is what is called becoming Buddha in the first *bardo*.

Question: At death, one makes a distinction between cessation of external breathing and cessation of internal wind. How do we recognize that the latter phenomenon has occurred?

Answer: First, external breathing ceases, then a hoarse vocal sound is heard and the person either breathes in or out for the last time. This is easy to observe. On the other hand, no sign absolutely enables us to detect precisely the ceasing of the *internal wind*. However, it is determined that it has ceased when movement no longer can be detected in the carotid artery. There is generally a five minute gap between the time external breathing and *internal wind* cease. In Tibet, it is traditionally said, "The time it takes to eat a bowl of *tsampa*¹," but this is not a fixed rule. The duration can be more or less.

¹Mixture of tea and roasted barley



Buddhalocana

Care should be exercised not to touch the body for at least three days or until the consciousness transfer (*powa*¹) has been performed. In Tibet, the rule is never touch a body during the three days after death.

Question: When precisely does death occur? Is it when external breathing ceases or when the internal wind element has dissolved?

Answer: Death starts when external breathing ceases, but is only final at the moment of the black path. It is also at the time of the black path that the *internal wind* ceases when the white *tigle* previously located at the top of the head and the red *tigle* from the navel join at the *heart*. When that happens the mind falls into unconsciousness. Falling into unconsciousness and cessation of *internal wind* occur both at the same time.

Question: In the event of accidental death, is there the process of absorption of the elements into each other?

Answer: The absorption of the elements into each other no doubt occurs in the event of accidental death but the process happens so quickly that it is impossible to recognize it.

The *bardo of dharmata*

After three and half days of unconsciousness, another period begins which is called the *bardo of dharmata*. It is as

¹Refer to page 78

if a person were emerging from deep sleep. During this period the Buddhas of the five families manifest themselves. They are intrinsically present in our mind as the expression of the five wisdoms¹. This is the second *bardo* of death called the *bardo of dharmata*.

Vairocana Buddha appears on the first day. He either manifests in the form of a Buddha, or in the form of dazzling blue lights of various geometrical shapes. When the blue light appears, another softer white light appears corresponding to the world of the gods². If a person seeing this has no idea of what is happening, the sheer brightness of the light of the Buddha is somehow terrifying and the person will turn away from it. One will be more inclined to follow the light of the world of the gods as it is soft and pleasant.

There are two correct attitudes to adopt in facing the situation:

- The first one consists of becoming conscious that the blinding blue light manifests the presence of Vairocana

¹The five wisdoms are a way of describing the functioning of the awakened mind. Each of them is linked to a Buddha:

- Discriminating wisdom and Amitabha Buddha;
- Wisdom of equanimity and Ratnasambhava Buddha;
- Accomplishing wisdom and Amoghasiddhi Buddha;
- Wisdom of the *dharmadatu* and Vairocana Buddha;
- Mirror-like wisdom and Aksobhya Buddha.

²The gods are the devas of Indian mythology. They are superior to humans in terms of lifespan and the pleasure they enjoy but nevertheless prisoners in the cycle of existence and so can fall into the lower worlds. These *gods* have nothing to do with the *God* of Christianity, Islam, or Judaism.

Buddha, so we pray that he will dispel the suffering and phenomena of the *bardo*.

- The second one requires more profound knowledge than the first one. It involves recognizing that the light which appears has no external existence and is the manifestation of one of the five Buddhas present in our mind¹ from time without beginning. It is their manifested aspects that are externally expressed but in truth their light has no intrinsic external existence. This is the luminosity of our own mind. This applies to Vairocana Buddha as well as the other Buddhas appearing in the following days.

Remaining fully aware that the light and the mind are one will free us from the suffering of the *bardo*. On the other hand, enticed by the white light of the world of the gods and becoming attached to it, leads to rebirth into the world of the gods.

Vajrasattva Buddha² appears on the second day with white light. At the same time the black light of the hell world is manifested.

Ratnasambhava Buddha appears on the third day with yellow light. At the same time the blue light of the world of humankind also is manifested.

Amitabha Buddha appears on the fourth day with red light. At the same time the yellow light of the world of hungry ghosts is manifested.

¹In the first attitude, on the contrary, Vairocana Buddha is only considered as existing outside oneself and is prayed to as such.

²Vajrasattva replaces Aksobhya with whom he is identified here.

Amoghasiddhi Buddha appears on the fifth day with green light. At the same time the red light of the world of animals and demi-gods is manifested.

The next day, all five Buddhas appear at the same time with all the lights of the six classes of beings. Forty-two peaceful deities will be manifested in our mind, followed by fifty-eight wrathful ones. These manifestations last for about three weeks.

If we are not afraid and recognize these deities and their lights for what they really are, we are freed from the second *bardo* and do not enter into the third *bardo* of death. If we haven't recognized them, the *bardo of becoming* begins.

The *bardo of becoming*

During the *bardo of becoming*, a person realizes that he or she has died, indeed a truly painful experience. Wanting to resume habitual links with people known in the past life, the person tries to talk with them. These people, unconscious of what is happening, cannot answer. The person suffers from this.

The mind of the *bardo* has no body in the material, physical sense, but does have a mental body endowed with sense faculties similar to ours. This mental body can move at the speed of thought and in an instant reach out anywhere in the universe.

All kinds of frightening phenomena occur during this *bardo of becoming*, in particular, lights and sounds. Terrifying sounds are heard, such as the din of a tumbling mountain, the crashing of storm waves on the ocean, the

crackling noise of fire, and the howling of wind. There again, we should not be afraid but rather think of these as deluded manifestations of our mind without real existence.

The conditioning of our mind that attached us to our past life gradually fades away at the same time as the conditioning of the new life comes into play.

The person during his or her life, who was accustomed to praying to Amitabha Buddha for rebirth in the Land of Bliss, can pray again with force and be liberated during the third *bardo* so that he or she will not have to be reborn in a samsaric existence.

If such is not the case, one is driven toward rebirth and sees one's future parents. One should then meditate, seeing oneself in the form of a *yidam*¹ such as Chenrezig, and think that the *yidam* dissolves into emptiness and abides in it. Moreover, when one sees one's future parents uniting, one should visualize them as two *yidams* in union. At this point, we do not have the freedom to choose our rebirth. Strength of *karma* drives us forward. Nevertheless, we can steer our life course by wishing for a good birth, enabling us to practice the *dharma* and walk the path toward awakening for the benefit of all beings.

Although the duration of the *bardo of becoming* can vary, it is generally said to last twenty-four days. By adding up the three *bardos* of death we have just briefly described,

¹*Yidams* are deities of the *vajrayana* with which a link has been established by initiation, meditation and reciting *mantras*. They must not be considered separate members of a celestial pantheon, rather as light manifestations of awakening.

theoretical duration comes to forty-nine days, but this again can vary greatly.

FURTHER DETAILS ON THE BARDOS OF DEATH

Question: Where does the knowledge we have of the phenomena of the bardos come from?

Answer: This knowledge was imparted by Buddha himself. A Buddha is omniscient and can describe all phenomena even those we cannot sense with our ordinary faculties. There are also some *lamas* who have attained great realization and have direct knowledge of these phenomena.

Question: According to the texts, one encounters major variations regarding the description of the bardos.

Answer: One encounters two kinds of presentations that differ in various ways. They are the *ancient tantras* and the *new tantras*¹. In the *new tantras*, there is hardly any mention at all of the manifestation of the wrathful and peaceful deities. These *new tantras* give a general approach of how the *bardo* is experienced by the mental body. The two types of presentations are not really contradictory. The *ancient tantras* just give more details than the *new tantras*.

¹The ancient tantras were the first wave of Buddhism introduced in Tibet under the aegis of an Indian tantric master Padmasambhava in the eighth century CE. In the following century the Tibetan king Langdharma, an enemy of Buddhism, destroyed most of it. Then in the tenth and eleventh centuries, some fervent Tibetans wishing to reintroduce Buddhism went to India. One calls new tantras those which come from this second introduction.



Amitabha Buddha

Question: Is the nature of the experience of the bardos determined by the previous existence? What is the connection between karma and experience in the bardos of death?

Answer: The teachings in the texts, of course, are very general and the experiences of the bardos are as numerous as the karmic patterns of the mind. Basically, what you experience in the bardos is your experience of the imprints of karma, it is nothing else. The different bardos that each individual experiences are considerable, just as the difference of the karmas of beings. However, the benefit of knowing the teachings of the bardos, just knowing that there is a bardo, is very important, regardless of the number of bardos that can be experienced. Once you know there are bardos, you have the possibility of experiencing liberation from the bardos. What arises in the bardos, in the form of deities, images, thoughts, and sounds is no other than a projection or reflection of your own mind. Moreover, the manifestation of appearances is directly connected with the possibility of liberation from the bardos.

There are three ways to attain liberation through the bardos. First, when fear or even panic is experienced, one should know that this fear arises because of the confusion and distorted views with which we consider things. You can be free of fear. If you recognize that whatever arises is not separate from the essence of your own mind, you will be able to experience liberation from these manifestations. The second way is to recognize without fear that phenomena arising in the bardos are a manifestation of

different Buddhas or the deities of the mandala of peaceful and wrathful deities. The third way is, after having developed an understanding of the *bardos* and fearlessness through practice, you wish to be born in the Land of Bliss of Amitabha Buddha. Because of this wish, the necessity to go through the *bardos* will not arise at all.

To be able to use one of these ways, you need to understand that there are *bardos*. People who do not know this are deprived of the possibilities of these different means and methods.

Question: People who are dying often lose touch with their surroundings and enter a hallucinatory world of their own that torments them in one degree or another. Where do their visions come from?

*Answer: At the moment of death, the mind is indeed susceptible to all kinds of hallucinatory phenomena. The dying person lives in a dream but believes it to be real, and is very often frightened and experiences suffering. The nature of these visions is not arbitrary. They depend on conditioning formed during this life by actions we have accomplished, the words we have uttered or the thoughts we have harbored. This conditioning models what our mind produces not only when the dying process is experienced, but also after death during the *bardo of dharmata* and the *bardo of becoming*.*

Question: Sometimes it is thought that the phenomena appearing after death depend on our beliefs. If someone did not believe in

hell, for example, hell would not manifest for him or her, would it?

Answer: The appearances that manifest do not depend on our beliefs but on our *karma* which is the positive or negative quality of deeds we have actually accomplished. Even if we do not believe that hell exists, if we have committed negative deeds that will cause hell to manifest; our mind will produce the false appearances causing immense suffering when the time is right. That is what hell is about. Nothing can prevent these appearances from being produced even if we do not believe they exist *a priori*. They appear because of latent conditioning that produces them and also because of *karma*, and not because of the ideas we have.

Question: Can we see our yidam or our spiritual teacher during the bardo of becoming?

Answer: To the degree that we have great faith and have accomplished spiritual practices during our life, the *yidam* or teacher can free us from the suffering of the *bardo*. We then can see them. Whether they appear or not in the *bardo of becoming* principally depends on our aspiration. The appearance of the deities of the *bardo of dharmata* is totally unrelated to our aspiration. Whether they appear as deities, or simply as lights or beams, they manifest themselves for us regardless of what we want or wish. An individual's aspiration can permit the manifestation of the *yidam* or teacher. Nevertheless, only *karma*, will allow us to experience the *bardo* in a peaceful manner and without

suffering. Apart from seeing Chenrezig as a deity, for example, pure appearances can be manifested by the force of *karma*.

Devotion can get the upper hand on *karma*. Someone can have heavy *karma* and a great devotion for Chenrezig, another *yidam*, or a teacher. If we die and our mind is filled with devotion, we can see them during the *bardo*, be released from suffering and led into the Pure Land.

Question: What happens to karma if it is possible to liberate oneself during the bardo?

Answer: If we can manage to be liberated, there is no need to experience karma. Karma disappears like a rainbow.

Question: Do appearances manifesting during a bardo change depending on the religion a person follows throughout his life?

Answer: Religious practices, whatever they are, do leave different imprints in our mind. In this respect, phenomena and visions of bardo can vary in one degree or another. However, if the form of phenomena changes, the substance of them stays the same. Dazzling lights and light bodies that appear are simply an expression of the nature of our mind. But this nature of the mind is one and the same for all beings.

Question: In the bardo, a being who does not have a physical body but a mental one, can move around at the speed of thought and go anywhere. However, it is said that the mental body

cannot go to Bodhgaya, the village where Sakyamuni Buddha obtained awakening.

Answer: It is not quite to the village of Bodhgaya that the mind in the *bardo* cannot go. It is to a place called *Vajrasana*, the diamond seat, in Bodhgaya, the exact place where Buddha attained awakening under the *Bodhi* tree. That is also where all the historical Buddhas are to obtain awakening. This place is full of special power and qualities. At the end of a *kalpa*¹, when the entire universe is destroyed by fire, only the diamond seat remains intact.

Question: Several studies have been done recently on people who, apparently dead, have come back to life after a short while. When they talk about their experience, they sometimes describe their out-of-body state and the view they had of their own inert body. Sometimes they talk about a light being, a relative or a demon coming toward them. None have ever spent three and a half days in unconsciousness. Do they really experience temporary death or is it something else?

Answer: Yes, it is a death experience in which the period of unconsciousness does not take place. The descriptions of the *bardo* give a general framework but do not preclude many other possibilities.

¹A *kalpa* is a cosmic era.



Pandaravasini Buddha

Question: Among the six bardos, there are three bardos of the present life, bardo from birth to death, bardo of dream, and bardo of concentration. Is it possible to practice the last three bardos during the present life in order to improve the experience of death?

Answer: If one practices methods of teaching in connection with each of the three *bardos* of present life, then one will experience inner liberation without going through the *bardos* of death. For instance, in the *bardo of birth to death*, one should apply the teachings of the dharma, in particular, train oneself in the development and completion stages of meditation. Regarding the *bardo of concentration*, one should cultivate meditation practicing *shinay*, *lhatong*, and *mahamudra*¹. As for the *bardo of dream*, one should do the practice of dream yoga. If one is able to apply the teachings in connection with each of these three *bardos*, there will be no need to experience the future *bardos*. Similarly, if one experiences liberation through the *bardo of death*, there will be no need to go through the *bardos of dharmata and becoming*. The experience of going through the different *bardos* is only within the realm of experience for ordinary beings without any substantial state of awakening.

¹*Shinay* (Tibetan), (shamata, Sanskrit) is the practice of mental calming; *lhatong* (Tibetan), (vipassana, Sanskrit) superior vision is a meditation practice of direct experience of the nature of the mind; *mahamudra* designates the practice of the ultimate nature of the mind.

For a person like Kalu Rinpoche¹, there was no experience of *bardo*. He was not making a drastic move into another situation. He had no sense of leaving anything behind or of experiencing loss. For him, death was voluntary and the future also arose out of his freedom.

SUICIDE

Question: If a person commits suicide, what does the mind experience in the bardo?

Answer: The mind of a person who committed suicide experiences fright and suffering in the *bardo*, like any ordinary being. However, Buddha said that suicide is an extremely negative act and that when *karma* ripens, it can cause serious consequences².

It is said that committing suicide is far more serious than killing another person. Committing suicide means killing the deities that are the essence of our body. That which motivates a person to commit suicide, and consequently to kill his or her own deities, is karmically more serious than the motivation leading to killing someone else.

¹Great teacher of the *Kagyu-karma* and *Shangpa* lineages. He passed away in 1989 as described page 43-46.

²*Karma* is not considered as a distribution of awards or punishment. It simply describes the law of causality. Suicide is a cause that necessarily involves suffering just as putting one's hand in a fire will necessarily involve it being burned.

Question: Is it not said that a person who commits suicide will do it again five hundred times in future lives?

Answer: Yes, that is correct and yet this does not happen systematically. Many factors merge to change karmic consequences. They are: the motivation of the act, the force of conflicting emotions, the nature of the karmic veils covering the mind, and so on.

Question: How can we help people who have tendencies to commit suicide?

Answer: The best thing is to accomplish positive acts, pray to the Three Jewels¹ and think that the merit of these actions is dedicated to the person suffering from this tendency. Being suicidal is also a sign that negative *karma* is ripening. If we accomplish positive acts, they will help offset this *karma*. If ripening negative *karma* is too strong then our positive practice will not have a visible immediate effect. This will nevertheless contribute to reducing negative *karma* of the other person.

DEATH OF GREAT BEINGS

Question: What is the difference between the death of an ordinary person and the death of a Buddha?

Answer: Death of an ordinary person is caused by the fading away of composite elements of the body because of *karma*. Such death is marked by anguish and suffering,

¹The Three Jewels are Buddha, *Dharma* (his teachings), and the *Sangha* (community of accomplished beings).

followed by another birth in circumstances governed by *karma* and no freedom of personal choice. By force of karma and circumstances, we have no choice but to experience the related sufferings of not wanting to die, of leaving behind possessions, families, loved ones, and whatever else that we have to leave. Again, the suffering comes from a lack of free will.

There is then the suffering of an unknown future. We have no reference like precognition of the future; thus, the future is bleak. Lacking a sense of the future brings further fears because we are not familiar with the experience of death. Kyungpo Neljor¹ used to say:

Death, I fear not

But rebirth do I fear

As rebirth follows the way of *karma*.

When a Buddha or a *bodhisattva*² dies, their death is apparently the same as that of an ordinary being if you consider only the fading away of material components of the body. Yet, they do not fear or suffer. Internal experience of death is not an experience of suffering, because death is essentially voluntary. For them death is

¹Kyungpo Neljor (990-1139) was a contemporary of Marpa and one of the major Tibetan masters who went to India to gather teachings at their source. He had many disciples in Tibet and founded the *Shangpa Kagyu* lineage.

²*Bodhisattva* designates a being who has been released from suffering and servitude of the ordinary world but who has not yet fully expressed all the qualities of the awakened mind. Far superior to ordinary humans, a *bodhisattva* has not yet reached the end of the path, that is, buddhahood.

merely a name. They have realized the nature of the immortal mind. They are beyond death and suffering.

Moreover, the three phases of *appearance, increase, and attainment* do not concern them. These three degrees of experience exist only for ordinary beings.

A Buddha is beyond *karma*. He or she only goes through physical death as an example for other beings. Since a Buddha dies, we too must surely die. This is only an appearance. From the viewpoint of the mind of a Buddha, birth and death do not exist. From the point of view of ordinary beings, a Buddha seems to be born and die, but that is not how a Buddha experiences them.

A Buddha is not concerned with the illusory manifestations of the *bardo*. When dying, he or she remains in the clear light, the absolute body, which is the essence of the mind. Birth is no longer ruled by *karma*. He or she can decide to be born again for the benefit of others without having to go through the *bardo*. Remaining in the absolute body, a Buddha manifests two formal bodies; the body of emanation and the body of perfect experience, for the benefit of beings.

Question: What happened when Kalu Rinpoche passed away? How can people benefit from this exemplary death?

Answer: As far as Kalu Rinpoche is concerned, it seems that his life's task was completed. It was more like leaving the old physical body behind. In that way it was voluntary, more an expression of completion rather than an involuntary act in the midst of what happens. It must have

been voluntary as it could be seen there was no suffering and pain prior to his passing away. He was in the hospital for a couple of weeks, and the doctors said that perhaps he should go back to his monastery because there was nothing wrong with him. Apart from some symptoms of weakness, the doctors could not diagnose anything. Kalu Rinpoche himself did not complain of pain, discomfort, or problems of any kind that were bothering him. He just wanted to return to his residence. The doctors were called again and no one could find anything wrong with him except that he was weak. As for his health, no matter when you asked him, he answered that he was fine. Mentally, his mind was well and alert. No problems of pressing physical or mental agony were apparent, or misgivings in leaving behind various Dharma centers, students, the monastery, or things that usually occupy other people's minds. There was no complaining, no unrest about anything. Even at the very moment before he passed away, he went to the restroom, came back, and sat in meditation posture. No sign of senility or anything like that. He passed away sitting in meditation, which is one of the most significant expressions of having control of one's mind. Not only did he have complete control of his mind but his mind was happy. We could see that he had died because there was no breathing. But after he had passed away biologically, he appeared more glowing and more alive than when he was alive.

This was an obvious indication of someone who transcended the fear of death. For Kalu Rinpoche, living

was not something totally separate from death. There was no duality.

For us, the immediate experience was of unbearable sadness and a great sense of loss. The more I thought of it intellectually, the more unbearable the sadness and the sense of loss became. However, if I just allowed myself to be in the presence of Kalu Rinpoche's mind, I could feel this tremendous well-being, a natural and enhanced peace. As a fundamental and intuitive experience, Kalu Rinpoche was more than alive. I felt the essence of Kalu Rinpoche's awakened mind as a continuous wave. That was my own experience and I am quite sure that various disciples shared this at different levels of intuition, vision, and inspiration. We did not cremate Kalu Rinpoche's body. When it was brought to the monastery, lots of light and special rainbows appeared in the sky. It was an unusual day in this part of the country. This reveals that an awakened mind can affect nature. Over a period of time, I had various experiences which had a beneficial impact in life and practice. We are not talking about some legend of the past when we are talking about the passing away and *samadhi*¹ of Kalu Rinpoche. We are talking about something that happened and was witnessed by people from different parts of the world, and particularly by sincere practitioners of the dharma. I would think that it gives them a tremendous inspiration to persevere on the path of the dharma. In brief, it has been a source of inspiration,

¹Samadhi is a state of meditative absorption.

blessing, and encouragement benefitting beings at various levels.

One of the key elements of this teaching was the truth of impermanence emphasized by the passing away of Kalu Rinpoche. We must practice the dharma because things are impermanent and futile. This is urgent. We must engage in the practice of the dharma. Intellectually, we know that things are impermanent in our lives, but our egoistic approach to phenomena is so strong, that knowledge of impermanence does not effect us much. When Kalu Rinpoche passed away, it was not only a teaching on impermanence; he was showing us impermanence in action. It is a practical, beneficial teaching and an important lesson for practitioners and myself. Many people were affected by his death. It was not just a story on impermanence, it was an aid for the practitioners to become more intimate with death and realize the urgent need to practice.

Question: It is said that some accomplished beings¹ do not die. Where do they go?

Answer: Some accomplished beings do not abandon their body but directly go with it to a Pure Land. Their physical body is transformed into a pure body. They leave no corpse behind them.

¹The expression *accomplished beings* (Sanskrit, *siddha*) means, in yogic terms, beings who have reached diverse degrees of accomplishment.

Question: When some high lamas die and their bodies are cremated, one sometimes finds small five colored pearls (white, blue, yellow, red, and green) in their ashes. These pearls are called ringsels. Where do they come from?

Answer: The *ringsels* are related to the five wisdoms and the five Buddha families. Accomplished meditators achieve the intrinsic qualities of their own mind through their knowledge of the nature of the mind. *Ringsels* are formed out of the energy of the five wisdoms and five Buddhas and can appear in the cremated remains of the physical bodies of accomplished beings. Then again this does not always happen.

THE NATURE OF THINGS

Question: The phenomena that appear in the bardo are called illusory manifestations just like those of the dream state or even this very moment. What do the words illusory manifestations mean? Do they imply that when the true nature of the mind and phenomena is realized, the mask of illusion has been removed and all manifestation ceases to exist?

Answer: No, not exactly. When the illusory manifestation ceases, pure manifestation does not. Illusory samsaric¹ manifestation is transformed into a pure manifestation. What we are living through now, where we are and the appearances we perceive are all illusion. Yet, it is this very illusion which is in itself non-illusion. The ordinary world

¹Samsaric refers to samsara, the collection of the possibilities of conditioned existence.

is a pure land beyond suffering. Transformation occurs at this level and does not mean that appearances disappear.

So what is the difference? The experience of illusory manifestation means we believe that perceived objects as well as the mental faculties which perceive them have an independent reality. Transformation of an illusory impure manifestation into a pure manifestation means that this dual grasping of subject and object ceases. The dual grasping ceases but appearances remain.

Illusory manifestation can be divided into two categories. One makes a distinction between objective appearances that are the sense objects perceived externally and mental appearances that are thoughts and mental images. Being under illusion means perceiving objective appearances and mental appearances as having independent reality. Consequently, we enter the game of attachment and aversion depending on whether we sense them as pleasant or unpleasant. Much suffering comes from this. When illusion ceases, appearances continue to exist but they are no longer assimilated as *objects* grasped by a *subject*. They are perceived as the manifested aspect of the mind or natural radiance of the mind. But in this case, attachment and aversion have no substance and therefore no suffering can occur.

There is no fundamental difference in manifestation of appearances whether we place ourselves within illusion or non-illusion. The difference comes from grasping or not grasping an intrinsic reality in phenomena. If reality is

grasped, this is illusion. If there is no grasping, it is non-illusion.

Question: During the bardo, we can liberate ourselves and be reborn in the Land of Bliss. What is the nature of this world?

Answer: For those who have not achieved the nature of the mind, the ultimate truth, worlds such as a Pure Land or at the other extreme, hell, really exist¹.

And yet they only exist in a relative manner. Where is the Land of Bliss? How many miles away? In which direction? If we ask questions like these, they remain unanswered because the Land of Bliss or hell really come from the mind's power to manifest them.

What produces the Land of Bliss rather than hell? Positive conditioning² of the mind generates pure appearances of the Land of Bliss. If, on the contrary, the mind stores up negative acts, conditioning will be generated producing impure appearances of hell. In essence

¹This does not mean that these realms exist or do not exist at all. It means that their existence is relative, like a dream or our present world. However, given that the mind accepts these worlds as real in illusion, they nevertheless convey suffering or happiness like a nightmare or a beautiful dream.

²Positive conditioning relates to the propensities inscribed into the *consciousness potential* by the positive acts we accomplish. Negative acts produce opposite conditioning. Only an awakened being is free of any conditioning. As long as we have not reached this, what we experience and the way we experience it is governed by karmic conditioning. This produces happiness or suffering depending on the nature of the conditioning. This molds our experience, organizes our unconscious, and produces the manifestation and experience of our dreams.

a pure land has no reality; it is a manifestation of the mind. For those who have not realized the nature of the mind, being born in a pure land is nonetheless an external reality. For those who have achieved this realization, the pure land manifests to the same degree but is not distinct from the mind.

From the relative point of view, as long as ultimate truth is not recognized, if we pray to be born in the Land of Bliss and if we accomplish positive acts with this motivation in mind, we will indeed be born in the Land of Bliss. We can understand this by looking at a dream. Sometimes we have beautiful dreams, sometimes we have unpleasant dreams. Neither have any truth in themselves but both depend on latent conditioning of our mind. However, until we understand the true nature of the dream, a beautiful dream is experienced as something pleasant having a real existence throughout the dream itself. An unpleasant dream is experienced as something unpleasant with a real existence. The same applies to the Land of Bliss or to hell.

Being born in the Land of Bliss while remaining in the domain of relative truth is not the same as reaching buddhahood, total awakening. It is said, nonetheless, that it is a liberation in so far as we are liberated from samsaric worlds in which we no longer need to be reborn. This is only a step on the way and not the end of the road. We still need to keep on purifying ourselves and accumulating merit. Buddhahood is a little like a far away town we would like to visit. The Land of Bliss is like a pleasant

stopover on the road where we can eat and refresh ourselves before starting out again.

There are many pure lands. In particular, there is one land for each Buddha of the five families:

- The Firmly Established Land of Vairocana Buddha;
- The Land of Pure Joy of Aksobhya Buddha;
- The Land of Glory of Ratnasambhava Buddha;
- The Land of Bliss of Amitabha Buddha;
- The Land of Accomplished Action of Amoghasiddhi Buddha.

The Land of Bliss is described as being devoid of conflicting emotions¹ and suffering that we experience in this world of samsara. One is free of harm and fear of enemies, suffering of illness, or poverty.

It is said, however, that whatever pleasant experience we wish, it can manifest itself spontaneously. Not only the best food will be manifested but also celestial palaces full of offering goddesses and even happiness the extent of which our present mind cannot conceive. Basically, all our needs and wishes become spontaneously fulfilled so that there is never any experience of lacking or dissatisfaction.

Within this wonderful setting, one has the opportunity to hear the teachings of the profound dharma. Many Buddhas can be met there and their teachings received. Once you are born in the Land of Bliss, you are endowed with the miraculous abilities to travel to the other pure lands, to receive teachings from the early Buddhas or

¹In other words, no hate, jealousy, attachment, pride, and ignorance.

principal Buddhas and then return to Amitabha's Pure Land.

You can meditate going through the different stages of the path and work for the benefit of all beings. For that matter, one will have the ability to see and relieve the suffering of anyone with whom one has had an intimate connection (family members, friends, relatives). When one has attained complete buddhahood which happens with effortless practice, then one is the source of tremendous abilities to benefit other beings. To be born in the Land of Bliss is a source of personal benefit, a source of experiencing buddhahood, and a source of benefitting others.

What we really want is to attain perfect awakening within this life. This is wonderful but it is very difficult. Very few diligent practitioners accomplish awakening within one lifetime. However, we can make a good beginning that will help us attain birth in the Land of Bliss, where there is no chance of falling back even in human birth. All unfavorable conditions are absent, all favorable conditions are present, and the experience of awakening is inevitable.

Birth in the Land of Bliss is relatively easy. There are four essential conditions. The first condition is to have a good sense or image of the Land of Bliss. We ourselves are unfamiliar with this pure land, but its description is mentioned in the teachings of the Buddha. We can also look at *tangkas* of Amitabha's pure land. Then we need to

meditate, keeping in our mind the painted images of Amitabha and the Land of Bliss.

The second condition is to have a sincere and genuine yearning to be born in the Land of Bliss. Daily constant aspiration and praying from the bottom of our heart is sufficient because the special vow of Amitabha Buddha. He made this vow to create an easily accessible pure land while he was on the path of awakening.

The third condition supports this aspiration through the practice of purification and accumulation of merit. We need to express the wish to be born in this pure land, while making offerings, acting positively, and constantly thinking with conviction, "I will be born in the Land of Bliss." It is said that when we die, we keep this thought in mind and effectively gain birth in the Land of Bliss. One can also practice the Seven Branch Prayer¹ that embodies both accumulation of merit and purification.

The fourth condition is to befriend *bodhicitta*. This means that you want to be born in the Land of Bliss for the benefit and ultimate liberation of all beings. Constantly you have to have an attitude of great concern for the relative and ultimate well-being of others.

These four conditions are necessary to be born in the Land of Bliss.

Being born in other pure lands requires thorough purification of conflicting emotions and karmic negativity. Having access to the Land of Bliss depends less on the

¹See page 122

purity of our *karma* than on our aspiration. It is said that if our aspiration is very strong and sincere, even heavy negative *karma* will not prevent it. This is the particular reason why a dying person's focus should be on birth into Amitabha's pure land and not in other pure lands.

Question: How do the other Buddhas and their pure lands relate to the experience of death?

Answer: Generally speaking, there is a connection between other Buddhas, pure lands and the experience of death. For instance, in the bardo of dharmata, Vairocana appears the first day, and each following day Ratnasambhava, Aksobhya, Amitabha, and Amoghasiddhi are manifested. However, the way they appear to individuals is different. For beings who have accomplished more purifications and have rid themselves of ignorance, the actual pure lands and Buddhas become revealed. For those of lesser purifications, perhaps the Buddhas only will appear and not much detail of the pure lands will be revealed. For the beings of more karmic veils, Buddhas appear in the form of rays of light. Essentially, Buddhas and pure lands appear to us because the pure nature of the five aggregates that constitute a being corresponds to the five Buddhas. As part of our nature they are manifested, but we cannot recognize them and we miss them.

Question: When it is said that great lamas go to a pure land after their death, what does it mean?

Answer: Great *lamas* indeed go to a pure land. It is said that it is the “perfectly pure land of the manifestation of their own minds¹” to which they go.

Question: Regarding suicide, we have talked about the deities of the body. What are they?

Answer: Our body is made up of four elements which are of divine nature. This is a point of view developed in the *Vajrayana*² and not dealt with in the *sutras* where it is simply stated that the body is an illusory appearance.

The body originates from the two *tigles*³, red and white. The *tigles* themselves are like the radiance of primordial knowledge which is also great felicity. From the point of view of ignorance, the body is organized on the basis of these two *tigles* and the *subtle wind*. In essence however, these are the three bodies of awakening: absolute body, body of perfect experience, and body of emanation. It is because we have not achieved the ultimate nature of our mind that we only perceive *tigles* and *wind* rather than the essence of the three bodies. The body is divine in nature

¹They have accomplished ultimate truth and as far as they are concerned the manifestation of a pure land is not perceived as something other than an aspect of the purity of their own minds.

² *Vajrayana* is the path taught by Buddha in the *tantras*. The *sutras* are the teachings of Buddha expounding the Small Vehicle (Sanskrit, *Hinayana*) and the Great Vehicle (Sanskrit, *Mahayana*).

³The red and white *tigles* refer here to the material supports of the feminine and masculine principles, in other words, ovules and spermatozoa.

because the essence of the body of perfect experience is the absolute body and its natural radiance is the formal body (comprising the body of perfect experience and the body of emanation). Committing suicide does not really involve killing a deity, because divine nature cannot die, but it is killing the causal foundation.

Generally speaking, it is considered in the *Vajrayana* that the five aggregates of our personality are of divine nature and beyond illusion. Essentially, the aggregates are the Buddhas of the five families:

- The aggregate of the essence of form is Vairocana Buddha;
- The aggregate of sensation, Ratnasambhava Buddha;
- The aggregate of perception, Amitabha Buddha;
- The aggregate of volition, Amoghasiddhi Buddha;
- The aggregate of consciousness, Aksobhya Buddha.

While we are in the realm of illusion, we experience only the five aggregates. It is not possible for us to perceive the five Buddhas.

Similarly, the five constitutive elements of the body are of divine nature and the five feminine Buddhas are their pure essence.

- The solid components of the body, as previously stated, flesh, bones, and so on, correspond to the earth element. The pure essence of earth is the feminine Buddha Buddhalocana;
- The liquid components of the body are blood, phlegm, and so on, corresponding to the water element. The pure essence of water is the feminine Buddha Mamaki;

- Temperature corresponds to the fire element. The pure essence of fire is the feminine Buddha Pandaravasini;
- Breathing and oxygenation process corresponds to the air element. The pure essence of air is the feminine Buddha Samayatara;
- Orifices and space inside the body correspond to the space element. The pure essence of space is the feminine Buddha Vajradhatvesvari.

In the *ancient tantras* system, there were many more deities, one hundred together, broken down into forty-two peaceful deities and fifty-eight wrathful deities.

In the realm of illusion, these deities are located in the body. Forty-two peaceful deities are in the heart and fifty-eight wrathful deities are in the brain. From the ultimate point of view, these deities appear only through the power of manifestation of our mind. In reality, one cannot say that such a deity is located in one place or another. Our body is also an emanation of our mind and all phenomena appear through the power of manifestation of the mind.

Question: What are the characteristics of the five feminine Buddhas?

Answer: The five feminine Buddhas are our nature, but not having realized our nature, we see them only in the form of the five elements or five *dhatu*s, which constitute our body. Although the nature of the mind is abstract and does not have elemental properties, because of our confusion, we characterize the elements of the mind as we experience them in our consciousness.



Amoghasiddhi Buddha

For instance, the pure nature of our mind has the quality of accommodation which is the empty nature of the mind. It is all encompassing, all accommodating, just like space. There is nothing that does not fit within space. The pure nature of the space element of mind is the feminine Buddha Vajradhatvesvari (Tibetan, Yingchokma).

Even though the nature of our mind is empty, it has the characteristic of awareness and continuity. From many lives without beginning, the mind continues and in the future, this continuity is not going to cease. This continuity, like a continuously running river, is the water element of the mind. The pure nature of this water element of the mind is the feminine Buddha Mamaki.

Even though the mind does not have any material or physical form, it is able to perceive and conceive of *samsara*, *nirvana*, and awakening. It is like visual images in reality reflected in the mind. This is the earth element of the mind and its pure nature is the feminine Buddha Buddhalocana (Tibetan, Sangye Chenma).

The fourth characteristic of mind is clarity or luminosity. It is said to be the most ultimate and incomparably pure luminosity. This is the fire element of mind and its pure nature is the feminine Buddha Pandaravasini (Tibetan, Go Karmo).

The next characteristic of mind is constant change like air. It is not fixed and displays itself in various ways that one cannot apprehend. This is the air element of mind and its pure nature is the feminine Buddha Samayatara (Tibetan, Damtsik Drolma).



Samayatra Buddha

From a dualistic point of view, we perceive three categories of elements which are physical, phenomenal, and mental elements. From an awakened point of view, however, one can recognize these elements as not being other than these feminine Buddhas, the pure characteristics of the mind.

Question: Are there some representations of these feminine Buddhas? Where can we find them?

Answer: You can find them in different places. There are *tangkas* of the principal Buddhas (Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, and Aksobhya) in union with the corresponding feminine Buddhas. You also find them in the hundred wrathful and peaceful deities of the *bardo*. There they are depicted singly and in that way the five masculine buddhas represent the five aggregates and the five feminine Buddhas the pure nature of the five elements.

Question: At the moment of death, individual consciousness is the last step in the process of absorption of the elements into each other. That is when the air element is absorbed. Then it is said that this individual consciousness leaves the body and begins to wander in the bardo. What is the nature of this individual consciousness?

Answer: Individual consciousness is that which knows all objects, be they internal or external, and that which experiences happiness or suffering. It is synonymous with

the word mind¹. The body dies but individual consciousness does not.

Individual consciousness is a kind of psychic body or a body made of latent conditioning. For instance, when we sleep, our body is motionless; and yet, our consciousness, in the midst of the dream it creates, can come and go, move and act in all kinds of manners.

Question: Where does this consciousness go after death?

Answer: It all depends on *karma*. Those who have committed many negative acts will first undergo much suffering in the *bardo* and experience anguish and terror. Then their consciousness will be born in hell, in the world of hungry ghosts or in the animal world. They will experience much suffering from the lower worlds. Those who have avoided negative conduct and accomplished positive deeds will produce good *karma* which will lead them to a happy existence or birth in a pure land. At best, they will reach awakening.

At death, the individual consciousness has no freedom of choice². It is subjected to *karma*.

¹In terms of the ordinary mind as we experience it here and now. An awakened mind is beyond individual consciousness. The latter reflects, on the contrary, how the mind operates in servitude of illusion.

²This does not apply to awakened beings who have been liberated from *karma* and can choose their birth freely in order to benefit beings.

Question: Some authors say that individual consciousness does not stay as one but splits into many conscioussnesses at the moment of death. Is that right?

Answer: In truth, there is neither one single individual consciousness nor several of them. The terms *one* and *several* belong to illusion. Although this individual consciousness is not simply one, as long as we remain in the domain of illusory manifestation, there is nonetheless *something* that experiences happiness, suffering, and sensations. Nowadays, most people think that individual consciousness does not last and there is nothing at all after death. This is a big mistake. Saying that the consciousness splits up at the moment of death is also a mistake, but not as large because we still have an idea of its duration.

Art of dying

DYING WITHOUT FEAR

We are perhaps young and in good health and we do not think much about dying. Yet death is an issue we will certainly experience. Death is a certainty, and only the moment of death is uncertain.

We may well envision death without too much fear, but when death comes and is imminent, fear will overcome us and we will experience great suffering. To die without fear, several conditions are required: we must have had some spiritual practice during this life and rejoice at knowing the *dharma* at the time of death; we must be detached from everything belonging to this world and understand the universal scope of death.

First of all, we need to know something about the dying process and about the possibilities of being liberated. Let us suppose that you want to go to Germany. You have never been there and you do not know the way. You then buy a map and locate the place where you live and the route you must follow to get there. This will give you some theoretical knowledge of the road. Similarly, having some knowledge of how death occurs and knowing about the *bardo* will give you some useful theoretical notions. Simply looking at the map will not get you to Germany and knowing how death occurs is not sufficient to free you. We need a car and gas to reach our destination. Likewise, we need spiritual practice throughout our lives to approach

death and *bardo* under the best conditions. We need to make an effort to accumulate merit right now, purify ourselves and recognize the true nature of our mind. Spiritual practice depends on us now. If we have none when death occurs, *karma* will carry us away without leaving any possibilities to react. On the contrary, nurtured by our practice in this life, we will have the possibility of facing death serenely and even liberating ourselves during the *bardo*.

When the last moment approaches we will be able to think,

“I was born in *samsara* without beginning and have lived and died so many times. Soon I am to die once more but this time I have obtained precious human existence. I have met and followed good spiritual masters and I have been able to practice the *dharma*. I am a lucky person because now I can die supported by my spiritual practice.” This is how we engender joy.

For those who die without spiritual preparation, anguish and suffering are inevitable. For us, even if we experience anguish and suffering, we will be able to face them.

Actually, we should not fear death but envisage it as a good thing. On the one hand, we will have been able to develop our own spiritual practice during the course of our life and, on the other hand, we will have instructions showing us how to make death a part of our practice. In the best case, we will reach awakening or buddhahood. If not, we can be born in a pure land as in the Land of Bliss.

Since death enables us access to an infinitely better condition than the one we are experiencing now, we should approach death with joy and not fear. We need to realize that joy and happiness in this life are not real joy or happiness. They are really suffering. Prisoners are happy when they are told, "Tomorrow you will be released and set free." They never think, "Oh, what a pity, I would not mind staying in my cell a little longer." Similarly, death should make us rejoice because if we are ready, death will free us from the prison of this world of suffering.

Being afraid of dying stems from our attachment to this life. We are attached to our body, our family, our children, our friends and relatives, our home, our environment, and our belongings. We realize that death forces us to part with all this and we suffer. What can we do to escape from the fear of losing all we have?

First of all, before we die, it would be useful to donate part of our estate as this would enable us to accumulate merit. We could make offerings to the Three Jewels or give our belongings to the needy.

Secondly, we could make a mental offering to Amitabha Buddha. We imagine that our friends and relatives, our belongings, our wealth, and all the things to which we are attached to are gathered in a *mandala*¹. We offer them all to the Buddha Amitabha, our spiritual teacher, or to the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* in general. It is

¹*Mandala*: in this case a *mandala* simply means imagining that all our belongings are gathered and presented to Amitabha as an offering.

hold that the beneficial effect of such an offering made at the time of death is enormous and even greater than material offerings made during the course of our life.

As a result of such an offering, attachment fades away. If we now decide to give someone something, we no longer consider ourselves the owner of what we give. The object we offer belongs to the other person and is no longer *ours*. Likewise, when we die, by giving Amitabha Buddha all that to which we are attached, we stop thinking we have any belongings at all. The weight of our belongings is transferred to Amitabha. Attachment can no longer harm us.

Dharma practitioners can learn non-attachment as the result of the attitude they have developed toward this world. For them, the world they live in is a little like a hotel. A hotel is a place people pass through, they live there for a week, and leave without being attached to it as they know it does not belong to them. Hotels are pleasant places, they are comfortable, have nice furniture and all that is needed. Meals are good, people serve us and many people take care of us. But throughout our stay we know that nothing belongs to us. Similarly, good *dharma* practitioners understand that they are only temporary guests in this world. Their house, furniture, and personal belongings somehow do not belong to them. Their friends and relatives are only temporary companions. They are used to the idea of having to leave them and contemplate it without worry.

Thinking about the natural and universal scope of death will help us face it without fear. We should think as

follows, "I am not the only one who has to die. All human beings, all beings die. All who are born will die. No one remains in this world forever. Everyone has to die, not just me."

Let us consider that death has happened to all who have lived in this world in the past and will happen to all who live here now and in the future. No one can escape it. Birth and death are connected by a natural chain of events. As it is simply the way things are, there is no need to fear death and be sad about it.

When the Buddha was giving his teachings in India, a woman lost her only child. Her sorrow was immense. She had heard about a wonderful person called the Buddha. She thought he was the only one who could help her out of despair: he would certainly have the power of bringing her child back to life. She sought him and presented her request.

"Lord, bring my child back to life!"

"I could do it," replied the Buddha, "on one condition. You must bring me a handful of seeds given by someone from a house where no one has ever died."

The woman went through the village from one house to another always asking the same question. "Could you give me a handful of seeds? But for them to be useful, no one must have died in your house."

Unfortunately, the answer was always the same, a relative, a brother, or a child had died in the house and no house had been spared by death. The old woman came back to the Buddha.

"Lord," she said, "I have not been able to get what you asked. Death has struck every house. No family, no house has been spared."

"That is right," said the Buddha. "Everybody has to die. It did not just happen to your child. That is a universal law. All who are born must die. Now that you understand, cease to be upset about it."

We too must understand how death is universal and not be afraid of it.

THREE WAYS OF DYING

If we have had no spiritual practice, we will be helpless when facing death as there are no means of approaching it effectively. However, depending on how much spiritual practice we have had during this life, we will be able to approach death serenely in several ways. Let us consider three attitudes that require an ever increasing inner growth:

- dying while thinking of the Land of Bliss,
- dying while thinking of *sending and taking*,
- dying while remaining in the nature of the mind.

Dying while thinking of the Land of Bliss

If we have no experience of the nature of the mind¹, the best attitude is to think of a pure land while dying.

¹In other words, if we have no profound experience of meditation. The *Land of Bliss method* was widely used by Tibetans who did not have much opportunity of meditating. It is also much appreciated in Japan and China. Many Tibetans dedicate the latter years of their life to recite the Chenrezig *mantra* as they want to be born in the Land of Bliss. In Japan and China, people tend to use the Amitabha *mantra* more.



Ratnasambhava Buddha

As already stated, we can offer our belongings, relatives, and friends to the Buddha Amitabha. Then we think, "I am going to die soon, may I be born again in the Land of Bliss in the presence of Amitabha Buddha." We keep our mind fixed on this idea and die in this state of mind.

It is important to nourish no doubt about the possibility of rebirth in the Land of Bliss and be fully confident. It is said that the strength of confidence and faith in Amitabha is enough for rebirth in the Land of Bliss even if we have accomplished many negative deeds. The following story will illustrate this.

There was once a skillful carpenter who spent all his life working. He was kind but not very intelligent and had never been interested in spiritual matters. His daughter was not at all like her father. Not only was she profoundly intelligent but she was also pious. She would often say to her father, "Working all the time is meaningless. You ought to practice the *dharma* from time to time." However, he never listened to her.

The carpenter was a man who lived up to his commitments in his trade. A promise was a promise. Regardless of circumstances, a commitment was binding for him. The daughter saw her father getting older without his mind turning toward the *dharma*. One day, she decided to use this attitude of her father's so when he died he would not be without preparation.

"Father," she said, "I met someone called Amitabha in town. He came from a place called the Land of Bliss, and was looking for a skillful carpenter to build a house. I told

him he could not have more luck, that there is no better carpenter than you. I committed you to build a house for him.”

The carpenter took this commitment very seriously. He thought about it all the time so when he died he had the Land of Bliss in mind. The strength of this thought led him to rebirth in the Land of Bliss.

There are two factors that can be connected in order to make possible rebirth in the Land of Bliss:

- the great power of our mind which is expressed here in the certainty of being reborn in the Land of Bliss;
- the wishes expressed by Amitabha Buddha on his path toward awakening. Because of the compassion he has for all beings, he wanted to make sure that those who heard his name and kept it in mind, would be reborn in the Land of Bliss, a pure land manifested by the power of his awakened mind.

If we now wish to be reborn in the Land of Bliss, we will die keeping this thought in mind, without fear, and rejoice when the time of death will come.

Dying while thinking of *sending and taking*

If we have some knowledge of the nature of the mind, it is always good to die while keeping in mind the motivation of *sending and taking*. This method takes advantage of suffering itself.

In general, the process of dying is a moment marked by suffering and anguish. When we are controlled by them, we must think, “I am not the only one suffering. At the

time of death, all beings experience suffering and anguish as I do. Yet no one really wants to do so and everyone would like to avoid it. But there is nothing they can do about it. Suffering and anguish are imposed upon them." If we do this, we will develop compassion for all beings.

Then we think, "Today, it is my turn to experience this suffering and anguish. Well! I hope there is enough to experience as I do not want others to suffer! I agree to take on the suffering of all beings who are dying within my suffering."

Then we do the *sending and taking* visualization. When we breathe in, we think we are inhaling black light full of suffering and fear belonging to all beings. We think that we accept all the suffering and fear and that they melt into us. When we breathe out, we think on the contrary, that we are exhaling white light full of happiness, merit, and all positive aspects of our mind. White light conveys this and gives it to all beings. We think they receive it, are relieved and happy. We do this visualization several times. It is extremely beneficial.

Dying while remaining in the nature of the mind

By far, the best way to die is to remain without distraction within the essence of the mind, which is the nature of the mind beyond illusion¹.

¹Clearly, this is only possible provided a very deep experience of meditation acquired during one's life.

What is suffering? What is death? In reality, they do not have any existence. They appear within the framework of the manifestation produced by the mind wrapped up in an illusion, just as they appear in a dream. It might occur in a dream that we are sick or afraid of dying. This is only an illusion without any existence. Phenomena of the present life share the same illusory nature. In the emptiness of mind, there is no death. No one dies. There is no suffering and no fear. Birth and sickness have no real existence either. The mind is immortal but the body is just made up of four elements with a name having no reality.

In the Golden Teachings of the *Shangpa* lineage¹, this point of view is explained in a practice called *No-death, No-error*. It is an important practice if we can understand it. Here it is said:

The mind as such is clarity-emptiness, without sickness.

In emptiness, death never existed.

Buddhahood is only a name, nothing to obtain anew.

Nobody walks around in *samsara*.

Samsara has therefore never existed.

Certainty of no-death of body and mind has been obtained,

No mistake is made about *samsara* and *nirvana*.

May I be healed of the sickness of *karma*, passion, and illusion!

May I right now achieve the three bodies!

¹The "Golden Teachings" are a system belonging to the *Shangpa* lineage of Kyungpo Neljor. The "No-death, No-error" is presented as the ultimate teaching.

Following these instructions and dying while our mind is absorbed in its true nature, immortal in itself, is superior to any other approach.

Question: In the teachings of No-death, No-error, not only does one talk of the no-death of the mind, one also talks of the no-death of the body. What does it mean?

Answer: No-death of the body does not mean that the body is immortal. It means, on the contrary, that as it is only made up of inert material elements, and it never lives by itself¹. Not living, it cannot die. The no-death of the mind means however that the mind has always been alive and always will be. The mind is immortal. The teachings on *No-death, No-error* puts the issue as follows:

- What is death? Is it the death of the body?
- No, because in itself, the body is only inert matter.
- Is it then the death of the mind?
- No, the mind cannot die since it is not born; the mind is deprived of death.
- What, then, is death?

¹Stating that the body is not alive by itself at any point of time may seem surprising if we take the point of view of contemporary biology which states that cell tissue is alive in itself. In the East, people consider that the presence of life in the body is due only to the presence of the mind expressed through subtle energies, and that bodies are the dynamic expression of these energies. We have also seen that death is described as gradual absorption of the energies until they are all absorbed in the consciousness that abides in the heart. Life and mind are closely dependent. The body as matter is not alive, only the presence of mind animates it and makes it sensitive.

- It is only an illusory thought, a concept, a name created by the mental faculties. Death concerns neither the body nor the mind. In reality, death does not exist.

Question: Why is dying with the thought of sending and taking considered a deeper approach than dying wishing to be reborn in the Land of Bliss?

Answer: Praying without distraction, with much faith and devotion enables us to be reborn in the Land of Bliss. This is something we wish for ourselves and from which we benefit. Consequently, this perspective is stained by egocentric vision.

On the contrary, the *sending and taking* visualization is based on the notion of the mind of awakening¹. This mind of awakening is full of great power by itself. It implies a compassionate mind directed toward all beings. The person living in the mind of awakening wishes to take on others' suffering, and to give them happiness in exchange. Egocentric vision is abandoned. The only remaining thought is for the benefit of others and love directed toward them. The power born out of compassion and selflessness confers superiority on the mind of awakening.

By the force of devotion and aspiration, the ones who are reborn in the Land of Bliss stay one step behind. They

¹The mind of awakening (Sanskrit, *bodhicitta*) is a courageous and noble attitude of mind on the part of people who engage on the path of awakening and whose only motivation is to benefit all beings. In this perspective, liberation is not sought for itself but as an efficient means of helping others.

will have to serve an apprenticeship of the mind of awakening in order to gradually advance along the path leading to complete awakening.

Question: Dying while being absorbed in the nature of the mind is the greatest method and yet, at first sight, the notion of benefitting others seems to be absent in this case.

Answer: That is only appearance. In reality, remaining in the nature of the mind implies total absence of ego, and a natural radiance of love and compassion.

While on the path, the practitioner continually develops the motivation of benefitting others by generating the mind of awakening and by dedicating the merit of positive activity. When death finally comes, if the practitioner remains in the nature of the mind, he or she will obtain full awakening and become a Buddha at the stage called the absolute body or clear light of the moment of death. When we reach buddhahood, benefitting others is accomplished automatically without intention or effort.

SPECIAL ISSUES

Question: In Tibetan Buddhism, a very special technique called powa (consciousness transfer) is practiced at the time of death. Powa directs the way in which consciousness leaves the body and, at best, is reborn in a pure land, or if not, at least acquires a human existence with the best chances to practice the dharma. What is this technique?

Answer: Indeed, this technique is useful to practice if we do not have great experience of *Mahamudra*, that is, direct

knowledge of the real nature of our mind. To be able to implement *powa*, we need to train during the course of our lives and be accustomed to practice it.

Powa is based on a visualization which, briefly, unfolds as follows. We consider our own body to be that of a *yidam*, Dorje Phagmo or Chenrezig, for example. The midline of the body is traversed by the central *channel*¹. We imagine Amitabha Buddha above our head in the Land of Bliss and surrounded by Chenrezig and Chanadorje. We imagine a *tigle*² in our heart. The *tigle*, union of our breath and mind, is marked by the syllable HRI. Then, we send the *tigle* into the heart of Amitabha.

We train ourselves in this practice our whole life but we actually perform the visualization only when we are sure we are dying³.

Question: At death, do we have to place our body in a special position?

Answer: For dharma practitioners, it is best to die while sitting in the meditation posture. If that cannot be done, we assume the complete lion posture, as follows. Lie down on

¹The central channel (Sanskrit, sushumna) is a channel of subtle energy that follows the midline of the body from the base of the trunk to the top of the head.

²In this case *tigle* means a small sphere of light we visualize and that can be considered as part of one's mind.

³The *powa* technique can only be used after correct training given by a qualified instructor.

your right side with your right hand under your right cheek, each finger closing a sense organ:

- your thumb placed on your ear;
- the index finger over the eye;
- the middle finger on the nostril;
- the third finger is left free;
- the little finger on the mouth.

Your left arm is placed along your left side. That was the posture the Buddha adopted when he left this world.

Question: When we are suffering from a terminal illness, we can choose to stay at home and die sooner or be admitted to a hospital and probably live a little longer. Which is preferable?

Answer: We might want to be admitted to a hospital; our relatives might prefer this solution also because they hope we will live a little longer. Being admitted to a hospital allows us to think we have done our utmost to live, and also permits our relatives to consider that they have done all they could. It is a good solution.

Approaching death

BECOMING MINDFUL OF IMPERMANENCE

In general, practicing the teachings of the Buddha is the best practice for the experience of death. One can learn to approach death without suffering and confusion. From the time one has taken refuge and in the course of one's life, practicing the different stages and levels of the path will be helpful. The practice of Buddha's teachings is complete and very diverse. All practices can be applied at death, in particular, the practice of turning one's mind to impermanence. The more one is able to be mindful of impermanence, the more one's mind will be geared toward engaging in virtuous acts and avoiding negative deeds. When one includes impermanence in one's training, at the time of death, one becomes aware that death is a consequence of impermanence. Death will not be a shock because it is inevitable.

Milarepa, through his own experience of impermanence says:

The fear of death has led me to the snowcapped mountains.
On the uncertainty of the moment of my death I have meditated.

Thus I have reached the immortal stronghold of true essence.
My fear has vanished into the distance.

The place in the mountains indicates where he meditated all the time on the impermanence of life and the

uncertainty of death. Death is inevitable and there is no escape. We do not know when it will come or how it will come. Death is totally uncertain and unpredictable. Meditating so much on these two points, Milarepa was able to free his mind from suffering and fear of death. If you develop a true feeling of impermanence, you will spontaneously abandon negative activities and increase virtuous actions. This accumulation of virtue will lead to the realization of the true nature of your mind and the state of *mahamudra*.

The third line of the song tells us that Milarepa has reached the secure place of the natural state of no-death. Understanding that death is merely a label for the disintegration of the body, one realizes the nature of the mind, *mahamudra*. That state of mind, surpassing the notion of death, is the natural state of no-death. Most people think of death as something that is real therefore fear arises in their mind. Milarepa, having reached the natural state of no-death, has lost the fear of death. People are afraid of death because they lack a practice in the experience of dying. This experience can be acquired by practicing the teachings of the Buddha, and by meditating on impermanence. Understanding the experience of impermanence will urge you to practice the dharma. The more you practice the dharma, the more prepared you will be for the experience of death.

Simply thinking of impermanence is not a remedy in itself but the familiarization of one's mind with impermanence will have some effect. It can be a source of

purification and the understanding of the necessity of practice. From the very beginning, the Buddha said, "All compounded things are impermanent." Things are perishable. Understanding, remembering this and familiarizing one's mind with impermanence will help to develop more positive qualities such as perseverance, patience, wisdom, discipline, generosity, and doing virtuous acts. It is one of the best practices to undertake in this life, so that the moment of death will not become a terrible experience.

IMPERMANENCE IN FIVE POINTS

Among the numerous teachings on impermanence, there are *the five points of impermanence* in accordance with the *Kadampa* tradition.

The first point is to familiarize oneself with the fact that **nothing remains stationary, everything continuously changes**. This is true of outer phenomenal world such as earth, trees, animals, and our physical body. Even our mind, in operating from one thought to another does not remain the same, even for a single moment.

Although everything changes, we only notice major changes, but even then, we rarely react. We are not normally aware of all the subtleties that are happening. For instance, we cling to the idea of events which occurred last year, last month, or even this morning; but in fact, there is not anything that is permanent and unchanging, in last year, last month, or today.



Mamaki Buddha

Sometimes we assert that a continuity is permanent. The same ongoing thing we call continuity of change. For example, last year you were crossing a bridge over a river, and the wind blew your hat off into the river. The water carried it away. Now, if you say, "Last year this river carried away my hat," that is not at all the river you saw last year. In fact, that is not even the water that you saw flowing a moment ago. It has gone, but you still hold onto the continuity of the change as the same thing that you saw last time. Even you, the person who is seeing the river is not the same; you have changed as the river has. Nothing stays permanent or stationary for a single moment. The present moment ceases to be and is already gone while the future moment is yet to come. Even if we try to make a constant out of time, past and present, we still refer to continuity. You should be aware and focus your mind on the fact that nothing remains permanent and unchanging even for a moment; everything continuously changes.

The second point is to **contemplate often those who have died**. From the time you can remember, how many people that you knew, with whom you had a friendly relationship, have died? It can be members of your family, teachers, friends, or colleagues. Now, think of the people you did not know well, or toward whom you felt unfriendly, or those you considered enemies, who have died. Think also of those with whom you did not have any particular relationship, neither attachment nor aversion but indifference. Try to remember how many have died.

If you were to make a list of all these people who have died, this list would be endless. Think about all these people who died against their wishes. Now, turn to yourself. You can see that it is quite surprising that you survived, that you did not happen to be one of them. Maybe, you will think it is miraculous and you will feel fortunate that it has not happened to you yet, but death could happen any time. It is important to wake up to this fact.

The third point is to **contemplate often the different causes of death**. There are many causes of death that we know. To cite but a few, we could list calamities of war, accidents, weather, and so on. People die in a house fire, in plane crashes or because an engine blows up. Death can be caused by floods, poison, weapons, or epidemics.

These are obvious causes of death but even the conditions which are supposed to support our existence can turn into being the causes of our death. For the sustenance of our body, we must take food, but it can happen that we eat certain food and it leads to fatal indigestion or poisons us. What will cause death is totally unpredictable and frightening. Gold or money is supposed to bring you financial security but supposing some people know that you have a little money. They become jealous, want to get it and destroy your life. The same thing can happen with friends. Either because of you, or because of your friends, your life is threatened. All these things that are supposed to be favorable to our existence can become the causes of our death.

Contemplate what will happen at the moment of death is the fourth point. Right now we feel that we have all our physical strength and mental faculties intact; we feel very confident about ourselves. We think we can do anything we want and are able to make whatever decisions are necessary in our life. We have a sense of resourcefulness; we are capable. Whereas at the moment of death, we will not feel able to do anything. Our mind will be pressured by the suffering of illness and the fear of this inevitable death. This combination of sufferings brings a tremendous sense of despair and helplessness so that the confidence and strength we may have known before are not available anymore.

Even if we know what is beneficial to do and what harmful things to avoid, we do not have the necessary strength to accomplish or to integrate them in our life. We cannot apply what is good or rid ourselves of what is unpleasant. We feel helpless because there is nothing we can do, even if we want to. Before that time of despair comes, one has to prepare for it. By practicing the dharma and training the mind, one will not be caught in painful experience or regret that one did not get prepared for dying. One will not be subjected to despair.

The fifth point is to **contemplate what will happen after death**. When your breathing ceases, death occurs. Death is another way of saying the body and mind separate. Even if the body has gone out of use, the mind has not stopped and continues. We should prepare for what the mind will go through because, after death, we do

not have the choice of refusing the experience. Our state of mind will be determined by our habitual and karmic patterns.

When the mind exits the body and goes through the phases of the bardos, the outlook the mind will experience will depend also on the habits that had been developed before. The mind will not experience what you want but will take a habitual course. If within this life, you did not pay attention and engaged your mind in negative habits, karmic patterns, and negative activity, the experience in the bardos will be confusion, suffering, and birth in *samsara*. If your mind has developed healthy habits, after dying the mind will experience a pure outlook, see awakened beings, and take birth in a pure land. It is a good preparation to recognize that the experience the mind goes through after death is related to habits developed in life.

It is most important for any individual to exercise one's mind on these five points. As they become a personal experience, one will automatically apply the complete practice of the dharma.

THE SEVEN BRANCH PRAYER

Contemplating the true reality of impermanence, one should at least be able to recognize the futility of worldly existence and cease clinging to various worldly pursuits. One will also be inspired to practice the dharma with more diligence and perseverance. Thinking about impermanence only will not be enough to prepare oneself for the moment of dying.

Impermanence is ignition for the practice. It is like getting into a car, getting the engine started, putting it in gear and waiting. You must hit the accelerator so that the car can move. Of course all these things are necessary. If you have not started the car and put it in gear, the car will not go anywhere. Practice is like accelerating.

The Buddha has presented limitless teachings on impermanence. All these different methods serve the purpose of cultivating a proper state of mind. The practice that embodies the essence of the teachings is the seven branch prayer. This is true from the point of view of the *sutras* and the *tantras*. Doing this practice will help us to get rid of seven gross conflicting emotions¹. There are many conflicting emotions but one can find seven dominant patterns.

This practice is a remedy, not only to purify oneself from the conflicting emotions but also for developing and nurturing the seven wholesome potentials of the mind.

Among the seven branch prayer, the first practice is **prostrating**. It is the antidote to pride. Pride is the strongest conflicting emotion because we have developed it since time without beginning. Pride, arrogance, or the notion of self-importance as well as egoistic clinging can be purified by prostrating to the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*. The result of this practice is that one will never be separated from the Three Jewels. Held in the kindness, love, and compassion

¹Pride, desire-attachment, accumulating negativities, jealousy, ignorance, having wrong views and doing negative deeds.

of the dharma teachers, one will go successfully on the path throughout one's future lives until awakening.

The second practice is **making offerings**. One can offer flowers, incense, light, and material things as well as things that one can visualize. This is the antidote for attachment. There are two aspects of attachment: external attachment to outer material things and personal attachment to one's body. Cultivating generosity and making offerings will help to get rid of any attachment in particular and undo the habits of attachment in general. The beneficial aspect of this practice is an accumulation of merit. It is manifested on a relative level by physical or material well-being and, at the ultimate level, by the experience of awakening under the form of the nirmanakaya (body of emanation).

Recognizing through the practice of **confessing** whatever unwholesome acts one has done is the third practice. It is the antidote necessary for purifying negativities accumulated since time without beginning. It will result in experiencing better forms of birth. For instance, one will find the appropriate vessel for the practice of the dharma. All one's good wishes will be fulfilled. Ultimately, this will result in experiencing awakening under the sambhogakaya (body of perfect experience).

The fourth practice is **rejoicing**. When you are able to cultivate the experience of actually rejoicing, this is the most appropriate antidote for the habitual pattern of envy or jealousy. This practice helps to get rid of jealousy in this life and in future lives. One will obtain favorable

conditions to practice the dharma, such as the support and inspiration of good dharma friends. One will live in a community favorable to the teachings of the Buddha. In terms of awakening, one will be capable of benefitting others in many ways.

The fifth practice consists of **requesting the Buddha to turn the wheel of the teachings**. It is the antidote for ignorance. Since time without beginning, we have accumulated very strong patterns of ignorance. By the power of this aspiration, one can develop the wisdom necessary to understand the profound meaning of the teachings. Ultimately, one will experience awakening under the form of Dharmakaya (absolute body).

Requesting the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* not to pass away is the sixth practice. Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* are beyond the question of passing away or remaining. With our confused perception we can see them being born, living and passing away. This is an erroneous view of the reality of the Buddhas. So requesting the Buddhas never to pass away is the antidote for this wrong view. It purifies all the conflicting emotions created by our wrong perceptions. The benefit of this request will be that in the future, one will have the proper view and will not develop any wrong view particularly in relation to the Three Jewels. In fact, one will develop a genuine confidence in the Three Jewels. One will attain awakening and obtain the experience of insight which is the inseparability of *samsara* and *nirvana*. The erroneous view of duality will be transcended.



Vairocana Buddha

Dedicating is the seventh point of this practice. It is the best antidote to unskillful—or stupid—acts. On a mundane level, what would be regarded as unskillful is when an individual has gone through a lot of effort and hard work to accumulate some money and suddenly spends all this money on frivolous things. There is no benefit to act like that. When this person needs the money for an important cause, it is already gone. This person has acted impractically and without intelligence. Let us take now the case of an individual who has done a lot of practice for the dharma and accumulated whatever merit. This person needs to use this accumulation of merit in a proper way, it is like funds in a mundane context. If that person dedicates the merit of the practice in order to get a comfortable life, it is very unskillful. If the merit is dedicated in order to get a better human birth or a birth into the comfortable realm of the gods, this is also an unskillful use of merit.

What is the proper dedication? It is characterized by two facts. First, you dedicate whatever practice you have done or merit you have accumulated toward your experience of awakening, nothing less. Second, as you dedicate your experience of awakening, you wish for the benefit of all beings. If the dedication is done properly, it is an antidote for unskillful means. It also causes development of more skillful means, not any kind of means, but those used by the *bodhisattvas*. You will be able to know, think, and act just as a *bodhisattva* does. Ultimately, you will attain awakening.

This is the proper way to dedicate, but what about doing practice for long life, or helping one get material success or well-being? Are these things not in contradiction to the proper dedication? If the practice is done with the aspiration to benefit all beings, there is no contradiction. It is complementary. One must attain awakening for one's benefit and the benefit of others. In order to do so, you must have good health, a long life, and be able to pursue the practice of the dharma.

When other people die

ATTENDING DYING PEOPLE

Question: Whereas in the past, religions used to teach people to adopt a certain attitude toward dying people implying a certain type of presence and assistance, our current society is mainly unconcerned with religion and seems to have produced a behavior anywhere from the extremes of indifference to uncontrolled manifestations of distress. Some people feel uneasy about it and try to find a solution in the frame of societies that help dying people. What should the right attitude be?

Answer: When a close friend or relative dies, people suffer a lot. Often we see people crying or expressing their sorrow in other, sometimes intense ways. Although this behavior is not at all beneficial to the dying person, it happens all the time. Why do people act this way? Quite apart from the compelling force of sorrow they have, they believe wrongly that manifesting their sorrow is a way to prove they love the person who is suffering.

It is also true that being indifferent would only make the dying person suffer even more. The dying person would feel abandoned and left alone to his or her suffering. People who are dying need to feel they have not been left

out, they need to feel people are concerned about them and their suffering.

Therefore, that is why we need to find the right and beneficial attitude. Initially, one might think that simply maintaining a peaceful mind and not being indifferent would be sufficient.

That is far from being enough. We also need to show much more love toward the dying person. That love has to be genuine and deep. Dying people need to feel and perceive it in our behavior and in every word. Tears and sorrow are not the real way to show a person our love. On the contrary, our love should be expressed with radiant peacefulness and immense concern¹.

¹Bokar Rinpoche is the perfect illustration of this attitude. In my capacity as interpreter (François Jacquemart) I have often had the opportunity of accompanying him on visits to dying or seriously ill people. Here is one example among others. There was a young woman suffering from cancer who had read a few books on Buddhism and had become very interested in it. Thanks to various people, she met a Buddhist who lived in her town. A short while afterward, Bokar Rinpoche was due to arrive on a visit. Her Buddhist friend knew she wanted to meet a *Lama* and take refuge and so asked Bokar Rinpoche if he would mind going to see the person. The person was unable to stand and had to remain in bed in the middle of a very small room. She had had someone get tea and biscuits ready for the visit. Bokar Rinpoche gave her refuge as she had requested. Then with kindness and spontaneous simplicity he explained a few things about Buddhism to her, said comforting words, and touched her face with the same care as a mother would her child's. His words and attitude showed no worry, no sadness, no regret, just love—clear, vast, and free like the sky. Then he sat on a chair at the foot of the bed just looking at her. For a few minutes he did not talk to her, he just sat there looking at her. His eyes were full of great kindness and immense tenderness. The whole room was filled with this feeling. Tears pearly silently from the eyes of the sick woman. Her heart was in peace, without fear, and full of the love

Question: Should dying people be told they are dying?

Answer: There is no general rule about this. What needs to be considered is whether the patient can accept the idea of death without suffering even more. More often than not, it is better not to tell people they are going to die because they certainly would not benefit from knowing. Most probably, they would feel even more anguish and suffering. If the dying person has had some spiritual practice, then we can tell him or her to contemplate death with calm and prepare for it. Otherwise, there is no point adding more pain to a situation that is already creating much suffering.

Question: It is hard to cover up our sorrow when someone close to us is dying. How can we understand that our sadness does no good to the dying person or the deceased. How can we control our sorrow?

Answer: Actually, it is said that tears do more harm than good to dying or dead people and that our tears and suffering produce more suffering in them.

In the *dharma*, suffering generated by birth and death, and suffering inherent to the world in general are the object of compassion. The sadness we feel when someone close to us dies makes us aware of suffering. Sadness should lead to compassion, and compassion will be expressed by praying, saying *mantras*, doing positive deeds

she had just received.

dedicated to the dying or deceased person. These prayers will also help us to alleviate our own sadness¹.

Ordinary sadness that has nothing to do with a spiritual approach or with compassion is mere attachment. Such sadness which is not generating prayers is a useless feeling. Furthermore, the text of the *Bardo Thodol* explains that too much crying and too much sorrow is harmful for the person who has just died. This person senses our sorrow and suffers because of it. Moreover, seeing our suffering will make this person even more attached to us and that might create an obstacle to the possibility of liberation occurring in the *bardo*.

Compassion, however, is a healthy and beneficial attitude. People close to us in this lifetime are people with whom we have a very close karmic connection. The person might have been our father, our mother or a friend in many of our lifetimes. Negative deeds committed in the past produce suffering in the present and carry the seed of future suffering. Having compassion means thinking, "Now this person is suffering and to keep his or her from falling into the lower worlds in the future, I need to do something to help." So we pray to the *lama* and the Three Jewels and we make offerings and wishes for that person. Then, we think that the mind of the *lama*, our mind and the mind of

¹In other words, the right attitude is not to slip into sadness, which in the final analysis means feeling sorry for ourselves. Rather we should consider the suffering of the person who is dying or that of the deceased and do what we can to relieve them. Sadness is sterile, compassion is fertile.

the deceased become one and we remain in meditation. That is the right attitude.

Question: What practical acts can one do to help a dying person?

Answer: Regardless of your religious background, if, as a family member, friend, nurse, or doctor, you are attending somebody who is dying, the most important thing is, with the best of your ability, not to hurt the mind of the dying person. You should not add to the agony you see this person going through, but try to protect him or her in providing whatever would be more pleasant, more soothing, and creates happiness. By any means, you should avoid doing and saying things that will cause pain, because this dying person's mind is incredibly vulnerable and is going through enough pain and agony. His or her mind is very worn out and may be in depressed moods. Anything unpleasant may have a tremendous implication which does not exist in a normal context.

When an individual experiences an illness that the body is not previously accustomed to, suffering from sickness and pain appear. Apart from physical pain, there is the worry that the sickness could cause death. This creates fear and suffering added to the suffering of the actual pain itself. Beyond that, certain behavioral restrictions apply. Activities that the person likes to do and food that he or she likes to eat are not allowed. For instance, the person likes to sit up or walk around, but must lie down.

Activities and things that he or she does not want to do must be done, as, for example, taking medicines. The person may suffer because of worries about resources, financial security, and so on. All this creates more suffering.

In order to help that person, you should remember that it is your responsibility to be aware of what this individual is going through. If you do not remember, you will not be aware of it, because it is not something you are going through. It may be clear for the person that he or she is going to die soon. Again this adds more suffering. It is not his or her choice to die. Control over the present situation is lost. The dying person knows that the time of separation from possessions, family, and relations has come. This is an unspeakable suffering. Worry comes also. The dying person wonders how family and relations will do without him or her. How will they handle the remaining possessions? Maybe these possessions will fall into wrong hands, or be misused. This thought brings more suffering. You should be aware of all that can happen and try your best to bring relief to the dying person. Helping a dying person is the most humanitarian, kind and thoughtful service you can do as an individual.

From a practitioner's point of view, you should bear in mind what would bring more comfort and happiness to the dying person. This attitude will bring some understanding and awareness if the mind and senses of the dying person can be stilled. Consequently, he or she will not be handicapped by a conflicting state of mind.

Personally for the person who is helping, this is bound to bear good results from the point of view of the truth of karma. If you practice the dharma and are able to extend service to a dying person, you can think of it as a source of purification and accumulation of merit. It is good practice for you.

If you do not have a spiritual discipline for approaching death and have to face the situation of attending a dying person, then your best help is the wisdom and intelligence of common sense. Bearing in mind that the dying person is going through much suffering, try to make that person more at ease and happy. Let us say that you feel the person is worried about how his or her possessions are going to be handled. You know that it will ease the situation to tell what is being done with them. On the other hand the opposite could be true. You may sense that the last thing the dying person wants to talk about is possessions, then close that chapter. If you express too much sadness, worry, or discomfort, because the dying person is close to you, that will cause added pain and agony. You have to maintain your composure even though you are immediately feeling the pain and suffering. Putting on an appearance will be more helpful to the dying person, because that is where help is needed more. If you look unemotional, the dying person may think you do not seem to care about his or her feelings or what he or she is going through. If you sense the person is feeling hurt, because you are not expressing any type of emotional displeasure,

then you must show some expression of sadness or whatever brings relief.

For instance, the person dying as well as the person attending have some familiarity with Christianity. If you know that the dying person is familiar with this tradition, you will be able to help him or her by suggesting he or she think of Christ, recall spiritual stories and prayers. That will give some relief to the mental agony, and steer him or her clear of feeling too much suffering.

If the individual dying as well as the attending person have some orientation with the dharma, accordingly mention or recite the names of Buddha and *bodhisattvas*. You can also recite the more common and popular *mantras* such as Chenrezig, Amitabha, or the prayer to wish to go to the Land of Bliss. The practitioner who is dying should be reminded that instead of dwelling on possessions, relationships, and the pain of leaving them all behind, he or she should realize that these things will pass. You should also remind the dying person to make offerings to Amitabha and the Land of Bliss.

Whether the dying person or attending people have any spiritual orientation, the one important element is to relieve the mental agony of this person. This will bring not only an immediate benefit but a much greater benefit in the future. Because the state of mind of a dying person is very intense, the attitude of the person colors the mind. This has some consequences in the phases of *bardos*, and in future lives too. If, at the last moment, the dying person is in a state of tremendous anger and resentment, the impact of these

emotions will be carried into the *bardos*. This could have very unhealthy effects in the course of the experience. If because of the circumstances, the individual dies with some thoughts of compassion, kindness, faith, or confidence, this will also have an important impact in the course of the phases of the bardos and the future lives. You can help the dying person now and for the future.

From the Buddhist point of view concerning the belief in the truth of rebirth, even though the physical body disintegrates in the process known as death, the continuity of the mind is not destroyed. The difference in the outlooks you have helped to form in the mind of the dying person is carried out by the continuity of the consciousness.

There are various other ways to help a deceased or dying person to purify a state of mind and experience more benefit. The practice of transferring the consciousness (*powa*) can be performed by experienced practitioners. The person who has died can still be in connection with the dharma through the different liberations such as hearing the text of the Bardo Thodol, or performing ceremonies like the mandala of peaceful and wrathful deities. There is also the particular practice, called *soor*, which consists in offering food that is burned into smoke. The various practices of accumulation of merit and purification help the person who passed away and clear the passages in the bardo.

Question: How should one deal with one's own emotion in the presence of the dying or dead person? How can one transform one's own suffering?

Answer: There are as many attitudes as there are differences between people. Some people do not have any spiritual orientation while some others have some religious familiarity. In the latter case, their attitude will vary depending on their views. You cannot dictate how everyone should think because people have the tendency to hold on to their opinions about reality very strongly. With any religious approach, it may be easier.

Some people take the death of a close person in a very personal way, whatever spiritual background they have or not. They think, "This is happening only to me," and it results in intense pain. One should think that it is not only one's own unfortunate experience but that death happens everywhere. The previous generations of one's family have gone through it and the future ones will have to go through it. It is not an individual case, it is happening both for the dying person and the people who have to face that death. To ease one's mind, one should not take it too personally. We have no choice. Rather, it is something that happens even if it is unfortunate.

If one has a religious background, one should do whatever is appropriate in this case such as praying. In the case of a dharma practitioner, it depends on the level of practice but in general you should approach death through meditation on impermanence. Because of birth, death is inevitable; meeting results in parting. What really helps, for

the living as for the dying person is to pray with confidence to the Three Jewels, the objects of refuge, and keeping in mind a beneficial attitude.

METHODS OF COMPASSION

Question: Since compassion is supposed to take the place of sadness, which are the skills we can use to effectively support this compassion and prevent it from being an ordinary feeling?

Answer: In addition to our attitude of love, we can help dying or deceased people by engaging in spiritual practices and dedicating the merit to them. For instance, we can pray to the Three Jewels, make donations to the poor, make offerings, circumambulate *stupas*¹, recite *mantras*, and so on².

Question: In that case when we meditate on Chenrezig for a deceased person or someone who is dying how do we go about it?

Answer: When we do Chenrezig practice for a deceased person—and this applies to any positive deed accomplished and dedicated to the deceased—first we turn our mind toward the person when we engender the mind

¹*Stupas* are symbolic monuments of the mind of the Buddha.

²The principle is the following: the suffering and difficulties endured by a dying or deceased person are really caused by negative *karma*. Practicing positive *karma* for this person, we counteract this negative *karma*. It is a new balance achieved at the mysterious level of spiritual forces. Chenrezig meditation is one of the most common forms of practice in Tibetan Buddhism. It involves reciting *mantras* in relation to a *yidam*, Chenrezig, who personifies the compassion of all the Buddhas.

of awakening¹. We imagine that we are going to work for his or her benefit, helping him or her to obtain release from suffering. We think we are going to recite *MANIS*² or accomplish some other spiritual practice. Then, when we get to do the actual practice we recite the *mantra* at the same time as we perform the following visualization. From the heart, Chenrezig³ radiates light that touches the deceased, purifies bad *karma* and all the veils accumulated in the mind since time without beginning. Then we imagine that the person is really released from any suffering and that he or she is filled with joy and happiness.

While reciting the *mantra*, we can also do the *sending and taking* visualization. We imagine that we breathe out white light that spreads all over the deceased and gives our happiness. Then we breathe in black light and take on all suffering. While dedicating the merit, we imagine that we give the dying or deceased person all the merit of the

¹Developing the mind of awakening means making the decision to devote one's life to benefit others. At the beginning of each meditation or ritual, certain words remind us of it. In the Chenrezig practice this orientation given to the mind is expressed by the two verses that follow the moment of taking refuge.

*Through the merit developed by my practice of giving and other perfections
May I achieve awakening for the benefit of all beings.*

²*Manis*: an abbreviation for OM MANI PADME HUNG, the Chenrezig *mantra*.

³Either Chenrezig is visualized above the meditator's head or the meditator visualizes him or herself under the form of Chenrezig or we can visualize Chenrezig facing ourselves in space.

practice and of reciting *mantra* so that the person can be reborn into the Land of Bliss. This can be done for the benefit of everybody, be they Buddhist or not.

Question: When we recite mantras in the presence of a dying person, is there one mantra more appropriate than another?

Answer: Chenrezig mantra, the names of the Buddhas, any mantra that we know will do, as they all convey a great spiritual force. But when you recite, it is important to do it with a profound beneficial intention at the same time.

The best thing to do is to recite *mantras* audibly into the ear of the dying person. However, if the dying person or the entourage is against your reciting *mantras*, you can say the *mantra* in your mind and visualize the Buddha present in space. Imagine that the Buddha's body radiates bright light that touches the dying person and dissipates the veils and mistakes which stain the mind of the person just as the sun melts the morning frost.

Question: What kind of offering can we give for the benefit of a person who has died?

*Answer: Any offering will do. It is said that material offerings made to the *lamas* and the *sangha*¹ are particularly beneficial but there are other ways of giving. You can give to the poor, contribute to building statues, *stupas*, or*

¹Sangha: the community of all who practice following the ethics and teachings of the Buddha. In this particular case it is the community of monks, nuns, and clergy.

temples, offer candles on the altar, and so on. You can also make a gift of life by buying fish or other animals which would have been killed and setting them free.

What is important is the orientation you give to your mind. When you dedicate the merit of positive deeds to the deceased you should think, "I am making this gift for the benefit of so and so." If the belongings of the deceased are given to you, it would be beneficial for the deceased if you were to use them as he or she would have and make offerings or donations so that ceremonies can be performed or *mantras* be recited for him or her.

Question: Reciting mantra and prayers, making wishes, offerings, and so on, are acts of compassion that we can accomplish for a deceased person. We can also ask one or more lamas to perform rituals for the deceased and give the lama a traditional gift. In that case what details will the lama need?

Answer: If possible the *lama* will need to have:

- the name of the person;
- the date of death;
- a photograph, if possible; a photograph is excellent.

Question: In Tibet people used to offer food to the dead. What was this custom?

Answer: During the forty-nine day period following the death, people would offer *soor*. *Soor* is a few pinches of flour grilled on hot charcoal with a little of whatever meal has been taken during the day. A short ritual would also be performed at the same time.

It is said that this practice is very beneficial for the deceased and also that the deceased has a mental body that feeds off the smell of food and not off the matter. Burning *soor* has the function of offering this smell. The best time to do this offering is at mealtimes.

Everyone can do this short ritual called *soorcho* and you do not have to be a *lama*. If you do not know how to do the ritual, all you need to do is offer the grilled food without the ritual. To consecrate the food recite instead OM AH HUNG¹ three times, then recite *MANIS*. When doing *soorcho* in addition to using flour you can burn any food except meat products.

THE NAMES OF THE BUDDHA, MANTRAS AND PRAYERS AND HOW EFFECTIVE THEY ARE

Question: The names of Buddha and mantras are only words. Quite apart from their meaning, where does their power which conveys spiritual help come from?

Answer: Buddha is a being who for countless kalpas² developed a motivation for the benefit of all beings, accumulated merit³, and made wishes⁴. The power attached

¹This ritual is not necessarily performed in the house where the person died, neither is it performed in a temple. It is generally done at home. The offering to be burned must be placed outside the house on a saucer or in some appropriate container.

²A *kalpa* is a cosmic era of virtually incalculable duration.

³The merit is the energy stored by the mind after accomplishing positive deeds.

to his name comes from these practices. The mere fact of hearing his name urges people to seek liberation. It is the power of the mind of Buddha that is expressed in his names.

Similarly, *mantras* are sounds uttered by Buddha and charged with his spiritual force. Therefore they have the same power as the names of Buddha. They also derive their efficacy from the power accumulated in the mind of Buddha throughout *kalpas* of purification, accumulation, and wishes made for the benefit of all beings.

Question: Above all, mantras, wishes, and prayers are deeds of our mind. It is hard for us to understand how a deed of the mind can have an effect on another person when the latter is present in his or her body. It gets even more mysterious when the people we wish to help are dead and their mind cannot even be located. How can we understand the efficacy of mantras and prayers recited for the dead?

Answer: First of all, we need to picture what happens when we recite mantras or make wishes in the presence of a body or bodily remains. There is still a connection between the mind of the deceased and the body to which this person was related when alive. It is through this connection that prayers and mantras convey our help.

⁴The wishes for the benefit of all beings, which by their own force and that of the thought, engender a dynamic process which will produce this benefit.



Vajradhatvesvari Buddha

However, even if there is no physical medium to connect with, there is a way to help that is only conveyed from mind to mind. The essence of the mind of all beings is in fact what we call Buddha nature. It is said that this Buddha nature completely embraces the minds of all beings and that there is no discontinuity. That is why the intention or orientation of the mind of one being can influence the mind of another being. It is a little like television. There are no wires, no visible connection, and yet, information gets across because in the apparent emptiness of the sky, waves are propagated and convey pictures and sounds. Similarly, the mind's essence is empty but it is not entirely empty. The *dharmakaya* (absolute body) is also dynamic clarity and this enables the *sambhogakaya* (body of perfect experience) and the *nirmanakaya* (body of emanation) to be manifested. All these bodies are clarity-emptiness, beyond concept and limitation. If the *dharmakaya* was just emptiness, it would be equivalent to simple nothingness. By virtue of the fact that the mind is more than emptiness and the fact that continuity of mind exists in Buddha nature, there is an interaction between the minds of different beings. This is why beneficial effects are produced, if we make wishes and do visualizations for other people. It is due to the power of interconnection that help can be brought.

The essence of the *dharmakaya* is empty but its attribute is a causal dynamic from which the manifestation of all phenomena proceeds. The strength of wishes and prayers stems from this principle.

Question: It is said that the door of the body through which the deceased's consciousness leaves has an effect on future rebirth. Is there anything to this?

Answer: Indeed, consciousness can leave through what is called the eight impure doors. They are the anus, urinary tract, navel, eyes, mouth, ears, nose, and the space between the eyebrows. These doors are impure as they give rise to rebirth in the conditioned worlds of the six classes of beings¹. When *powa* is done, the doors are closed by visualizing and tagging the syllable HRI onto each of them. However the door of the orifice of Brahma, located at the top of the head is opened. That is where consciousness must pass through for the person to be reborn in a pure land.

It is said that if one touches the corpse of the deceased, consciousness is attracted to that area that was touched. It is why one should avoid touching the body of the deceased for at least one hour after death and if possible wait for three days before doing so. If one really has to touch the body of the deceased, this should be done at the top of the person's head. Otherwise, one risks misleading the consciousness toward an inferior birth.

It is also said that one should not talk out loud or make noise near the body.

¹The six classes of beings are gods, demi-gods, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts, and beings from hell.

Question: What would happen, if without touching the doors as such, one were to touch a neutral part of the body such as the knee or the arm?

Answer: If you touch the person's knee, then consciousness would not leave through the knee but may well be attracted toward the lower doors. Touching the body above the waistline would attract consciousness toward one of the impure doors of the head.

Question: Nowadays some people think that dying is preferable to suffering and advocate euthanasia. Is that a good thing?

Answer: No, it is not a good thing at all. Even if the person is in great physical pain and even if at the moment, we feel we would be relieving the dying person, euthanasia still comes down to killing someone. It is therefore a very negative deed.

Question: In some countries the dead bodies are buried, in others they are cremated. In Tibet, the corpse is often cut in pieces and offered to vultures. Which is the best way of disposing of a corpse?

Answer: The way we dispose of a corpse has no importance per se if there is no connection with a spiritual practice. Whether you bury, cremate, or plunge a corpse in water, there is virtually no difference. In Buddhism, when a corpse is cremated, a ritual called the offering to fire is performed as it helps to burn the errors and the karmic veils of the deceased. In that case, cremation is beneficial and only in this case. Similarly the deceased will benefit if

the corpse is dropped in the sea or in a river with the intention of making some kind of contribution to the fish or shellfish or if it is buried in connection with a religious practice. These differences are differences of customs related to the countries and it is right to follow the local customs.

Question: If the corpse is cremated, what do you do with the ashes?

Answer: You may keep them and purify them through a ritual. The ashes are mixed with sand that has been consecrated by blowing on it after reciting *mantras*. One can also ask great *lamas* to blow on the sand and ashes when they do rituals for the deceased. This is called purifying the ashes and helps the deceased a lot. Then the ashes can be used to make *tsha-tshas*¹.

Question: It is now a very common practice to transplant organs. What can a practitioner do if he or she is present at the extraction of organs? Some people who receive organs from dead people have psychological problems to deal with, such as the fact that they have a part of a dead person in them. How can one help?

Answer: Generally, because of the confusion of people's minds, there will be limitless opinions and beliefs. What is positive for some people will be felt as negative by others.

¹*Tsha-tshas* are small figures of clay mixed with ashes of the dead. Inside the *tsha-tshas* are inserted *mantras* written on a small roll of paper.

Anyway, in terms of general common sense, if someone has died and his or her organs are useful for somebody, that is very good. It is not so much a question of the person not being totally dead or that the extraction of organs will cause suffering. If a person has made a will and if the organs are useful for others, it is not only beneficial for others but also for the dying person. If a practitioner is present at such time, it would be very good to have a sincere attitude of dedication of whatever virtue or merit is accumulated through giving this organ to whomever needs it. In the future, the giver will experience a better karma or birth and all his or her faculties will be intact.

For the person who is using the organ of a dead person and thinks of this organ as a part of someone else, opinion, illusion and confusion can be limitless. The psychological discomfort experienced by this person is a result of his or her confusion. Basically speaking, what is originally yours? This organ did not come in this particular form from time without beginning. Your body is not the same as the body in which you took birth. As much as this organ is not yours, this body is not yours either. It is an egoistic distortion to cling to one's body. This so-called body of yours has come from karmic components such as your parents' bodies. If you examine parts of it closely, let alone the whole body, there is not a part you can claim as originally yours. Instead of feeling this unnecessary paranoia, one should feel thankful for being able to survive because of the transplanted organ given by another person. If that person is able to go beyond that very confused

thinking, he or she should have some sense of gratitude for the dead person. Whatever benefit has been received through this transplant, virtue and merit should be dedicated to the person who died. One should also pray that, in the future this person will have all organs and faculties intact.

SPECIAL TECHNIQUES

Question: Can the powa technique we use for ourselves at the time of death be used for another person?

Answer: Indeed a lama or someone who is very experienced can perform powa for someone else. Powa is done for ordinary people, those who have not developed deep knowledge of the essence of their mind.

In the case of a meditator who has been practicing *dharma* for a long time, rather than doing *powa* you provide some assistance so the dying person can keep the mind clearly centered on itself. Those assisting the person remind him or her how important it is to maintain meditation without being distracted. Therefore he or she dies present in his or her true nature.

Question: What is material powa?

*Answer: This is a blend of certain substances in pill form that you can apply on the corpse's orifice of Brahma in order to attract consciousness toward this *exit* which opens the way to the pure lands. The substances used are *sacred leavens* or a mixture of magnet power, honey liquor, and burned shellfish powder. These substances act by virtue of*

their own inherent power and do not need to be consecrated.

Question: Some techniques that are used at the moment of death are called "liberation through taste," "liberation through contact," and "liberation through listening." What are they?

Answer: Liberation through taste refers to substances that come in the form of small pills that the person has to swallow. They are often leavens of various origins and their preparation process has never been discontinued over time. They are:

- preparations made by great masters of the past;
- leavens which can also come from *termas*¹, pills called "born Brahman seven times;"
- leavens taken from relics and ringsels of Buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, and past masters;
- leavens of the *five tantric flesh* and the *five tantric nectars* prepared by past Indian or Tibetan masters.

These substances must be swallowed before death.

Liberation through contact most often means the "hooked liberation circle" which is a square piece of paper folded a certain way with *mantras* written in a circle on it. If possible, we burn these mantras on the heart² of the person

¹The *termas* are treasures hidden by Padmasambhava in the eighth century and are intended to be discovered when the time is right. *Termas* can be texts, objects, or relics.

²Spiritual heart, not the physical anatomical organ.

just after death. If not the paper can be burned separately and the ashes put on the person's heart.

Liberation through listening refers to reading texts to the person who is dying or to the dead. These texts are called presentations as they present to the person the process that is currently happening in addition to the practices that must be done. The *Bardo Thodol* (Tibetan Book of the Dead) belongs to this category.

It is very beneficial for such a presentation to be read before death actually occurs. Even if we do have some knowledge and experience of the *dharma*, if our spiritual practice was not deep enough, weakness and illness prior to death can prevent us from remembering them. If a *lama* or a friend reads aloud the instructions contained in the text of *liberation through listening*, the person's memory will be stimulated. The *Bardo Thodol* text gives such presentations for use prior to death.

The same text also gives a description of what happens in the *bardo* day after day. We read then the appropriate section each day to the deceased.

The word *liberation* in these different expressions has to be understood at several levels. Indeed for those whose karmic veils are very tenuous, these methods enable them to achieve a rapid liberation. For other people whose veils are dense, they will sow the seeds of liberation.

Appendix 1

The six bardos

At the moment of entering the bardo of birth to death, without losing a single instant, I give up laziness and engage without distraction in listening, reflecting and meditating upon the teachings. Seeing appearances and mind as one, I practice to transform them into the three bodies of the Buddha. Since I was fortunate to take birth as a human being, I should not indulge in distraction.

At the moment of entering the bardo of dreams, I give up mental opacity, the indifference of a corpse-like sleep, and with focused attention, I engage in the fundamental state of these dreams. In a lucid dream, I visualize, transform, and practice the clear light. Without sleeping as an animal, I integrate the practice of sleeping.

At the moment of entering the bardo of meditation, I give up distraction and the world of illusion. Liberated from distraction and without fixation, I engage in the state free of determination. I want to attain the stable practice of development and completion stages of meditation. Having abandoned mundane activity, I practice in union. May I not fall under the power of conflicting emotions.

At the moment of entering the bardo of death, I abandon attachment and fixations of the mind. I engage one-

pointedly on the path illuminated by instructions. I eject my mind into the space of unborn mind. Separated from this body of flesh and blood, I will know it to be impermanent and illusory.

At the moment of entering the bardo of dharmata, I abandon fears and terror of terrifying appearances. I recognize that whatever appears is manifestation of the bardo. At the cessation of essential experience, may I not fear the assembly of peaceful and wrathful deities created by my mind.

At the moment of entering the bardo of becoming, I focus my mind on a unique intention. I follow the manifestations of positive karma and close the doors to birth keeping in mind resistance to temptation. It is the moment where courage and pure vision are necessary. I abandon attraction-desire and meditate on the lama with his consort.

Without thinking about the arrival of death, absorbed by long-term projects, and after having accomplished futile acts in this life, if I left with empty hands, I would have made a mistake. As I need understanding of excellent dharma, why should I not begin practicing the teachings now? The lamas with great kindness say, " Is it not self-illusion if you forget the instructions of your lama?"

Appendix 2

The seven branch prayer

With complete faith I prostrate
To Buddha Sakyamuni,
To all the victorious ones and their children
Who abide in the ten directions and three times.

I offer flowers, incense, light,
Perfume, food, music, and many other things,
Both in substance and with my imagination.
I ask the noble assemblage to accept them.

I confess all evil actions that I have done
Influenced by the defilements
From time without beginning until now:
The five¹ that ripen immediately,
the ten non-virtuous acts², and many others.

I rejoice in the merit of whatever virtue

¹They are: killing one's father, killing one's mother, killing an arhant, making a Buddha bleed with an harmful intention, and creating a schism in the *sangha*.

²Killing, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, lying, dividing talk, harsh words, gossip, covetousness, ill-will, and wrong views.

Shravakas¹, pratyekabuddhas²
Bodhisattvas, and ordinary people
Gather throughout the three times.

I pray for the wheel of the dharma to be turned,
The teachings of the mahayana and hinayana,
In ways suitable for the different aptitudes
And motivations present in beings.

I ask the buddhas not to pass into nirvana,
But, with great compassion and
Until samsara is completely empty,
To look after all beings
Who drown in this ocean of sorrow.

May whatever merit I have accumulated
Become a seed for the awakening of all beings.
Without delay, may I become
A splendid leader for all beings.

¹Hearers or listeners. They are the practitioners of the first turning of the wheel of the dharma.

²Solitary awakened beings.

SMALL GLOSSARY

ACCUMULATION OF MERIT: Practice of positive *acts* allowing us to store energy for the progression on the spiritual path. This accumulation of merit can be done through the practice of giving, making offerings, reciting *mantras*, visualizing deities, and so on.

ACCUMULATION OF WISDOM: Practice of understanding the empty nature of all phenomena.

ACT: Physical action as well as words or thoughts.

NEGATIVE ACT: All negative deeds which deliberately cause others to suffer, and leave an imprint of more suffering on our mind that will condition our experience and vision of the world.

POSITIVE ACT: Following the law of *karma*, an *act* is positive when it creates happiness in us.

AKSOBHYA: *Buddha* of the Vajra Family; manifestation of mirror-like wisdom which purifies hatred-aversion; East; blue in color.

AMITABHA: *Buddha* of Infinite Light; *Buddha* of the Lotus Family; manifestation of discriminating wisdom which purifies desire-attachment; West; red in color.

AMOGHASIDDHI: *Buddha* of the Activity Family; manifestation of accomplishing wisdom which purifies jealousy; North; green in color.

AWAKENING: State of *Buddhahood*.

BARDO: The word *bardo* means intermediate state. If used without any other precision, it means the length of time between death and rebirth. Theoretically, it lasts forty nine days. It can also designate limited periods of time known as the *six bardos*:

- *bardo* from birth to death (present life),
- *bardo* of dream,
- *bardo* of concentration (meditation),
- *bardo* of the time of death (process of dying),
- *bardo* of the nature of the mind it-self (first part of time following death),
- *bardo* of becoming (second part of time following death).

BARDO THODOL: Famous *Tibetan Book of the Dead* which describes in detail what happens after death and how to obtain liberation in the *bardo*. It can be read to the deceased person during the *bardo*.

BEINGS: There are six classes of *beings*: gods, demigods, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings.

BODHICITTA: Aspiration to obtain *Awakening* in order to help all beings.

BODHISATTVA: Being who follows the *bodhicitta* path and seeks to obtain *Awakening* not only for oneself but for the sake of all *beings*. An ordinary being who commits to practice *bodhicitta*. One who has attained *Awakening* and dwells in one of the ten stages of the *bodhisattvas*. A *bodhisattva* can be physically present in our world or abide in domains of more subtle manifestation.

BODHISATTVA POSTURE: Seated with legs crossed, left heel against the perineum, right foot and leg are bent flat in front.

BODY: Ordinary physical *body*. State of possessing numerous qualities, in Sanskrit, *kaya*.

BUDDHA NATURE: Potential of *Awakening* inherent in all *beings*.

BUDDHA: One who has awakened. A person, as the historical *Buddha Sakyamuni*. In Tibetan, *Sangyay*. *Sang* means purified from the conflicting emotions, duality, and ignorance; *gyay* means that the infinite potential of qualities of a *being* is awakened.

MASCULINE BUDDHAS: There are five Buddha Families corresponding to the manifestation of *five wisdoms*, the purification of *five poisons*, a direction, and a color. See *Aksobhya*, *Amitabha*, *Amoghasiddhi*, *Ratnasambhava*, and *Vairocana*.

FEMININE BUDDHAS: They represent wisdom and emptiness as well as the essence of the *five elements*. See *Buddhalocana*, *Mamaki*, *Pandaravasini*, *Samayatara*, and *Vajradhatvesvari*.

BUDDHAHOOD: *Awakened* state characterized by wisdom (as knowledge of the true nature of phenomena and their manifestation in the *three times*), *compassion* for every *being*, and power to help all *beings*.

BUDDHALOCANA (Sanskrit): Sangyay Chenma (Tibetan). Feminine Buddha; expression of the pure essence of the earth element; her color is white.

CHENREZIG (Tibetan): Avalokitesvara (Sanskrit). *Buddha of Compassion*. Most popular Tibetan deity, his *mantra* is OM MA NI PAD ME HUNG. See *Chenrezig, Lord of Love* (ClearPoint Press).

CLARITY: With emptiness, one of the aspect of the nature of the *mind*. *Clarity* designates the dynamic aspect which includes the faculty of knowing and creating all manifestation.

CLEAR LIGHT: Nature of the mind.

COMPASSION: Aspiration to liberate all *beings* from *suffering* and cause of *suffering*.

CONFLICTING EMOTIONS: Desire-attachment, hatred-aversion, ignorance or mental dullness, jealousy, pride, and so on.

CONSCIOUSNESS: From a dualistic point of view, each object of the senses corresponds to a consciousness. There are six or eight consciousnesses depending on their classification. First, let us consider six consciousnesses:

- visual consciousness (forms),
- auditory consciousness (sounds),
- olfactory consciousness (smells),
- gustatory consciousness (tastes),
- tactile consciousness (tangible objects),
- mental consciousness (imaginary objects).

One can add two other consciousnesses:

- disturbed consciousness or ego consciousness which corresponds to the influence of *conflicting emotions* on our relationship to phenomena,

- potential of consciousness or "all-ground consciousness"(Sanskrit, *alayavijnana*) which contains all the latent conditionings of *karma*.

DEDICATION: Aspiration that any merit accumulated through our positive *acts* serves to attain *Awakening* for the benefit of all *beings*.

DHARMA: *Buddha's* teachings or the spiritual path.

DHARMAKAYA: Absolute Body, designating a state beyond any spacial or temporal determination; corresponds to emptiness.

DHARMADHATU: In this case *dharma* means phenomenon and *dhatu* space. Emptiness as space where appear all manifestations.

DORJE SEMPA (Tibetan): Vajrasattva (Sanskrit), deity of the *Vajrayana* who is the source of *purification* practices. The practice of *Dorje Sempa* includes a *visualization* as well as recitation of a *mantra*.

FIELD OF BLISS: (Tibetan, Dewachen; Sanskrit, Sukhavati) Pure field of Amitabha Buddha.

FIVE AGGREGATES: Physical and mental constituents of a being prisoner of duality and illusion:

- aggregate of forms (physical elements and particularly the body),

- aggregate of sensations (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral),

- aggregate of perceptions (understanding of the nature of that which produces pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral sensations),
- aggregate of volition (reactions toward perceived objects),
- aggregate of consciousnesses.

At a pure level, these aggregates become the nature of the five *masculine Buddhas*.

FIVE ELEMENTS: Earth, water, fire, air, and space. They are the symbol of different states of the matter. Space designates the emptiness in which all manifestations appear. The essence of the five elements corresponds to the nature of the five *feminine Buddhas*.

FIVE POISONS: Desire, anger, ignorance, pride, and jealousy.

GIVING: There are three kinds of giving to others:

- material giving,
- making others feel safe,
- making the *dharma* available.

GURU YOGA: Practice of prayer and meditation in order to unite our mind with the mind of an Awakened teacher.

HEART: The *heart* does not refer to the physical organ but the chakra of the *heart* located along the central *channel* at the level of the *heart*. In the East, people consider the *heart* as the seat of the *mind* and not the brain.

KADAMPA: Lineage originating with the teachings of the great Indian master Atisha, in the eleventh century.

KAGYUPA: One of the four great schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The other ones are Gelugpa, Nyingma, and Sakya schools. The *Kagyu* lineage originates with Marpa the Translator in the 11th century.

KALPA: Cosmic era of an extremely long duration.

KARMA: The law of *karma* describes the process of cause and effect. It is a three-phase process:

- an *act* leaves an imprint in the mind of the one who acts (cause).

- this *act* is stored in the potential of consciousness and is slowly ripening.

- this process is actualized in a particular form of *suffering* or joy (result).

LAMA (Tibetan): Guru (Sanskrit). A spiritual teacher.

LHATONG (Tibetan): Vipassana (Sanskrit), superior vision, meditation practice as direct experience of the nature of the mind.

LOVE: Aspiration to bring happiness to all *beings*.

MAHAMUDRA: Literally the "great seal," designates the ultimate nature of the mind as well as the method of meditation to achieve it.

MAMAKI (Sanskrit and Tibetan): Feminine Buddha; expression of the pure essence of the water element; her color is blue.

MANDALA: Literally “center and surrounding.” The world seen as an organized universe. Designates a deity with its surrounding environment. Can be represented on a *tangka* which is then used as a *support* for the *visualizations*.

MANDALA OFFERING: Practice during which we imagine offering the *mandala* of the universe to *Buddha*, *Dharma*, and *Sangha*.

MANTRA: Sacred sounds, the repetition of which helps the mind purify itself and develop its potential for *Awakening*. For example, the *mantra* of Chenrezig is OM MA NI PAD ME HUNG.

MIND: This term can refer to the ordinary functioning of the *mind* called “psyche” as well as the absolute, non-dual pure essence of the *mind* beyond the fluctuations that may affect the ordinary mind.

MUDRA: Hand gesture done during rituals.

NIRMANAKAYA: *Body* of Emanation; appears as human or other forms to guide ordinary *beings*.

NIRVANA: Literally extinguished, cessation. Early definition included liberation from conditioned existence, ignorance, and conflicting emotions. Later definition were expanded to include the development of great *compassion* through skillful means.

OBSCURATION: Conflicting emotions and dualistic perception that veil our *Buddha nature*.

OBSTACLES: Circumstances not favorable to the *dharma* practice which can be experienced as external *obstacles*, internal *obstacles* (sickness), and secret *obstacles* (our own thoughts).

ORIFICE OF BRAHMA: Point situated on the top of the head through which the consciousness has to be ejected while practicing *powa*.

PANDARAVASINI (Sanskrit): Go Karmo (Tibetan). Feminine Buddha; expression of the pure nature of the fire element; her color is red.

POWA (Tibetan): Practice taught by Naropa to guide the ejection of consciousness out of the body to a Buddha field at the time of death.

PURE LAND: (or Pure Field) Domain of manifestation of a *Buddha's mind*. There are many *Pure Lands* one can access depending on one's aspiration and accomplishment. They are not part of *samsara* and are not affected by *suffering*. Being born there does not mean that one has achieved complete *Awakening* but will provide one with the means to progress on the spiritual path. For example, Dewachen is *Amitabha's Pure Land*.

PURE SUPPORTS: They are used in meditation. Statues representing the *Buddha's* body; Texts expressing the *Buddha's* speech; *stupas* symbolizing the *Buddha's* mind.

PURIFICATION: All negative *acts* done in this life and in the past lives have left imprints in our potential of consciousness.

These imprints will ripen, engendering *suffering* and *obstacles* to our spiritual practice. *Purification* will neutralize these imprints in order to avoid or reduce their effects. A qualified teacher might designate specific practice to do in order to purify oneself.

RATNASAMBHAVA: Buddha of the Jewel Family; manifestation of the wisdom of equanimity which purifies pride; South; yellow in color.

RINGSEL: Small pearls of different colors which can be found in the ashes of the body of awakened beings. They can also spontaneously appear from sacred objects.

SAKYAMUNI: Literally “wise man of the Sakya,” name of the historical *Buddha* who lived in the 6th century BCE.

SAMADHI: State of meditative concentration.

SAMAYATARA (Sanskrit): Damtsik Drolma (Tibetan). Feminine Buddha; expression of the pure essence of the air element; her color is green.

SAMBHOGAKAYA: *Body* of Perfect Experience, it appears to guide beings in the *Pure Lands*.

SAMSARA: Cycle of conditioned existence in which each *being* is born and dies. It is characterized by *suffering*, ignorance, impermanence, and illusion.

SANGHA: Community of Buddhist practitioners. One distinguishes ordinary *sangha* from the Noble *Sangha* which is composed of those who have attained the *bodhisattva* levels.

SENDING AND TAKING: Bodhicitta practice of development of *love* and *compassion* through which one gives one's positive potential and happiness to others and takes their *suffering* upon oneself.

SEVEN FOLD PRAYER: Traditional prayer taking different forms but always having the seven following points:

- 1- homage,
- 2- offering,
- 3- regret of faults,
- 4- rejoicing of accumulated merit,
- 5- requesting the Buddhas to teach,
- 6- requesting the Buddhas to remain in this world,
- 7- dedication.

SHANGPA: The *Shangpa* lineage originates with Kyungpo Neljor, a great Tibetan master of the eleventh century. Today, this tradition is linked to the Karma *Kagyupa* lineage.

SHINAY (Tibetan): Shamatha (Sanskrit). Mental calming. Meditation practice which frees the *mind* from reacting to the play of thoughts. It can be done with or without *support*.

SOURCE LAMA: Generally, the *lama* we recognize as “our” teacher, who gives us initiations, instructions to practice, and

explanation of the texts. More particularly, the *lama* who allows us to directly experience the true nature of the *mind*.

STUPA: Monument or sacred object symbolizing the *mind* of the *Buddhas* and which spreads their spiritual energies.

SUBTLE WINDS: Prana (Sanskrit). Winds or energies which circulate in the *subtle channels* and link the *body* to the *mind*.

SUBTLE CHANNELS: Nadis (Sanskrit). Network of invisible channels through which circulate the *subtle winds* or prana.

SUFFERING: Generally it is analyzed on three levels:

- *suffering of suffering*: physical and mental pain experienced by all *beings*.

- *suffering of change*: one experiences *suffering* when happiness ends.

- *suffering of conditioned existence* is suffering one undergoes because of the deluded nature of *samsara*. It ends only when one attains *Awakening*.

SUFFERING OF THE HUMAN REALM: Birth, aging, sickness, death, sorrow, grief, despair, getting things we do not like, losing things we like, not getting what we wish for, and so on.

SUPPORT: Any object of concentration, material or mental used by a practitioner in meditation.

SUTRA (Sanskrit): Text of the exoteric teachings of the *Buddha*.

SVABHAVIKAKAYA: *Body* of Essence Itself, unity of the three first Bodies (Dharmakaya, Nirmanakaya, and Sambhogakaya).

TAKING REFUGE: Placing oneself under the protection of the *Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha* (the Three Jewels). In the *Vajrayana*, one takes also *Refuge* in the Three Roots, *lamas, yidams,* and dharma protectors.

TANGKA (Tibetan): Traditional painting on cloth representing deities, *mandalas,* or teachers of the lineage.

TANTRA: Text of the esoteric teachings of the *Buddha* which is related to a deity.

TEN DIRECTIONS: North, South, East, West, four intermediate positions, zenith, and nadir.

TERMA: Text or object hidden most often by Padmasambhava (Tantric Indian master who introduced Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth century) in order to be discovered when it is necessary.

THREE TIMES: The past, present, and future.

TIGLE (Tibetan): Bindu (Sanskrit). Small sphere of light visualized during meditation.

TSA-TSA: Tsa-tsas are small figures of clay mixed with the ashes of the dead. Inside the tsa-tsas are inserted mantras written on a small roll of paper.

VAIROCANA: Buddha of the Buddha Family; manifestation of the wisdom of *dharmadhatu* which purifies ignorance; Center; white in color.

VAIROCANA POSTURE: It is also called seven-point posture: 1. legs in vajra position, 2. hands in meditation *mudra*, 3. straight spine, 4. open shoulders, 5. chin down, 6. eyes gazing in space downward, and 7. relaxed tongue.

VAJRA: Ritual object used with a bell. Diamond which symbolizes the indestructible purity of the nature of the mind. The deity *Dorje Sempa* holds a *vajra* in his right hand.

VAJRADHATVESVARI (Sanskrit): Dorje Yingchukma (Tibetan). Feminine Buddha; expression of the pure essence of the space element; her color is yellow.

VAJRA POSTURE: It is also called "diamond posture". Seated with legs crossed, first, the left foot on the right thigh and the right foot on the left thigh.

VAJRAYANA: Path of Buddhism also called "Diamond vehicle" referring to the part of the *Buddha's* teachings written in texts of an esoteric nature called *tantras*. It uses recitation of *mantras*, *visualizations* of deities and works with the *subtle winds* or energies.

VEILS: That which obscures our *Buddha nature* such as ignorance, latent conditioning, dualistic perception, *conflicting emotion*, *karmic veils*, and so on.

VISUALIZATION: Creation of a mental image used as a support in a meditation or ritual. These images can be geometrical forms or deities, moving or still. This exercise is not dependent upon visual perception but upon inner faculty of imagining.

YIDAM: A personal deity expressing the pure nature of the *mind*. A deity upon which one meditates after having received an initiation.

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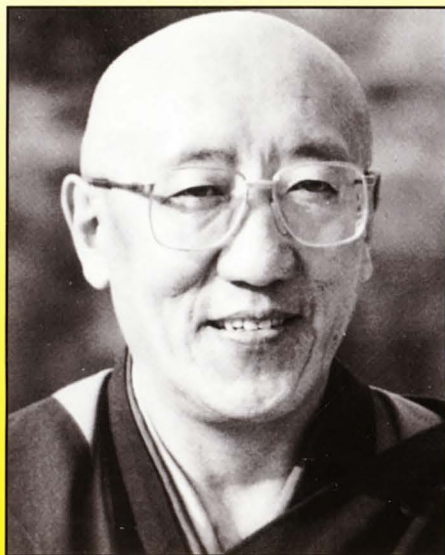
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